

Halo: The War of Rage

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Summary: We will wage war, a war of rage, against the Prophets for their treachery. They will fall in the name of our gods: the ancient gods we used to worship before we formed the Covenant. Please R&R.

1. Prologue: The Extermination Begins

****Prologue: The Extermination Begins****

Covenant Holy City of High Charity

6th Cycle of the 5th Division of the 3rd Stage of the 9th Age of Reclamation (Covenant Holy Calendar)

1830 hours, October 25, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

The dim light in the corridor reflected off the purple metal in a strange way as the Brute walked towards the Sanctum of the Hierarchs. He knew something was up. He sensed it. Why else would the High Prophets of Truth and Mercy have called him to their private sanctum? The Brute couldn't help wondering if it had something to do with the Sangheili. Yes, that had to be it.

The large doors opened and the Brute stood there in the doorway. A noble voice sounded from across the chamber.

"You may enter, Tartarus."

The Brute walked in towards the figure floating in the air. When he was close, he lowered himself to one knee and bowed his head. "Noble Prophet of Truth, what is the reason for your request of my presence?"

"We have a special task for you, Tartarus. We have discovered that the Sangheili are starting to doubt the Great Journey. Because of this they are becoming weaker, and they cannot be trusted

anymore."

A door opened on the other side of the chamber and the Prophet of Mercy floated in on his throne. "The Sangheili have escorted us and kept the Covenant together for countless cycles. But now it is time for a change. The Sangheili are starting to fail, but we now have a race to replace them."

Truth turned to welcome the other Hierarch who floated up next to him, "Yes, Brother Mercy. The Jiralhanae are strong and faithful. I am starting to trust them more than the Sangheili." Truth turned back to Tartarus, "Our plan is to first send several groups of elite Sangheili warriors to the ring's Quarantine Zone. They will think that they are being sent there to capture the building holding the Sacred Icon. We know this is impossible, but they do not. We are going to send you with the Arbiter to claim the Icon. You are to drop the Arbiter at the Sentinel Wall so he may deactivate the shield surrounding the Quarantine Zone. Then we may send in the other Sangheili to their deaths. You must help the Arbiter reach the Icon in whatever way you feel necessary."

Mercy added, "If the Arbiter fails, you must continue to retrieve the Sacred Icon. We suggest that you make it easier on yourself and make sure the Arbiter gets to the Icon alive."

"Once the Icon is claimed, you are to take it and dispose of the Arbiter," Truth continued. "With the Arbiter dead, we will commence with the extermination of the Sangheili. We no longer need the Sangheili and they are becoming a threat to the Covenant. They must be eradicated."

Tartarus rose to his feet. "Gladly," he said with a grin.

"Good. You may leave and prepare a Phantom for departure. Your assignment will begin as soon as possible."

"My faith is strong and my hammer swift. I will not fail you, Holy Ones," Tartarus said with his head high. He turned and walked out of the chamber with a sense of great pride. He would finally be able to get rid of that nuisance, the Arbiter, and the rest of his bungling race.

2. Ch 1: The Sacred Icon

****Chapter 1: The Sacred Icon****

Halo Installation 05, Library of the Index

7th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation (Covenant Holy Calendar)

1320 hours, October 26, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

Tartarus impatiently looked over the pilot's shoulder. "We should scout ahead," he said, "to see how much longer it will take the Arbiter to reach the Icon."

The pilot turned around. "But shouldn't we be protecting the Arbiter?"

"He can take care of himself while we are gone." Tartarus was somewhat confident in the Arbiter's abilities to defend himself, but he couldn't wait for his chance to dispose of the Arbiter once and for all. "Now hurry up and see if we can find where the Icon is."

The Brute piloting the Phantom nodded and turned back around to the controls. The Phantom then left the gondola that the Arbiter was riding on and went speeding down the tunnel. Soon enough, the ceiling started to rise and the tunnel widened. The cavernous room that they entered was like a central dock for the special gondolas. The room was shaped like a large donut with the docking platforms in the middle of the circular cavern.

"That must be where the Sacred Icon is held," Tartarus said in awe. "When the Arbiter runs inside there, set me and the others down on the ledge. We will follow him in and take care of him. But let us go back and see how he is doing."

The Phantom turned around and sped back the way they came. They reached the gondola and could see the Arbiter fiercely battling several Flood Combat Forms.

"What is that beast up to? I could use some help right about now," thought the Arbiter as he sliced off the head of another Combat Form. He had found out that his energy sword was very effective against the Flood, as long as he was able to behead the creatures or impale their chests before they could do any severe damage. He turned around and ran his sword straight through two Combat Forms running at him, impaling both on his sword. Out of the corner of his eye the Arbiter saw the Phantom returning to the gondola. Suddenly, several Combat Forms jumped down from a ledge that the gondola passed under. Suddenly the familiar voice of a Jiralhanae sounded in his helmet.

"I'll thin their ranks!" Tartarus said over the comm. link. "Take them out!" he shouted at the pilot.

The Arbiter was grateful when he saw streaks of plasma striking the Flood. He was thankful to have a short break. He walked towards the front of the gondola and saw the wide cavern open up in front of him. There was a feeling of awe about this large room, even though it was just a dock. The Arbiter stood at the front of the gondola taking in the view when the gondola lurched to a halt and Tartarus's voice snapped him out of his trance.

"Hurry, the Humans are already inside, Arbiter!" Tartarus bellowed over the comm. link. He leaned over the pilot's shoulder again, "Drop us off where the Arbiter went in. We must catch him before he leaves."

Tartarus went to the back of the Phantom and signaled for the other Brutes that it was time. Tartarus stepped onto the gravity lift and dropped down to the ledge below followed by his companions. They ran through the opening in the wall and looked for the Arbiter. They saw him just as he ran through another passageway and disappeared. As they chased after the Arbiter through the short narrow tunnel, Tartarus heard shots being fired and barked a command in his native tongue for the group to slow.

"Sergeant! Stay down!" Commander Miranda Keyes was unaware that here companion was unconscious, but she didn't have time to find out. That Elite had materialized out of thin air and attacked the Sergeant. She pulled out her Sub-Machine guns and unleashed a hail of bullets at the strangely armored Elite. Unfortunately, her aim had been shaky because of the unexpected attack. She had only taken down the Elite's shield and heard a bullet ricochet off the armor plating before it ducked behind a fallen Enforcer for cover.

"Johnson! You all right? Johnson!" Miranda was hoping for an answer, but Sergeant Avery Johnson's body lay motionless on the floor. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the Elite leap into the air at her. She turned to fire her weapons but she wasn't fast enough. The Elite swatted the SMG's out of her hands and she suddenly felt as if the gravity had shifted towards the wall to her left. She didn't feel herself land on the shoulder of the large Brute because she too was knocked unconscious.

Tartarus and his Jiralhanae came to a large open room. In the middle of the room he could see a deep hole with the remains of Sentinels and Enforcers strewn all around it. When he was close enough, Tartarus saw that a Human was standing in the middle of the wreckage shooting at a blur that ran behind a large skeleton of an Enforcer. Tartarus decided that he better do something before the Arbiter gets killed, because if anyone was going to kill the Arbiter, it was going to be him. He thought he would surprise that Arbiter and take the Human just as the Arbiter was about to strike. And that's just what he did. He saw the Arbiter jump from behind the debris and swat the Human's weapons away. Tartarus realized that this Human had the Sacred Icon with it, so instead of pushing it off the edge he decided to take the Icon from it. He took out his hammer and thumbed a button on the handle. Suddenly the frail Human came flying towards him and he caught it on his shoulder. He set down his hammer and grabbed the Icon from it and put it in his belt.

"Excellent work, Arbiter. The Hierarchs will be pleased."

"The Icon is MY responsibility!" the Arbiter was furious at Tartarus.

"WAS your responsibility," retorted Tartarus. "Now it is mine." He put the Human he carried onto one of the other Brutes shoulders who was also dragging another Human by the foot. "A bloody fate awaits you and the rest of your incompetent race, and I, Tartarus, Chieftain of the Jiralhanae will send you to it."

"When the Prophets learn of this, they will take your head!"

"When they learn?" Tartarus chuckled. "Fool. They ordered me to do it."

And with that, Tartarus thumbed another button on his hammer, which was pointed towards the Arbiter. A pulse of energy blasted from the hammer and the Arbiter was thrown backwards and disappeared into the chasm behind him.

Tartarus turned to the others, "Quickly, we must return to High Charity and report our success. We will keep the Humans as prisoners. To the Phantom!"

Tartarus walked down the same hallway to the Prophet's Sanctum. The Humans were now conscious, bound, and following Tartarus at gunpoint. The door to the Prophet's chamber opened and the group walked in.

"Holy Ones, I come with good tidings. I bring with me the Sacred Icon and Human prisoners," Tartarus said proudly as he walked in. The Prophets turned from the large window where they were admiring the view of the sacred ring, Halo.

"That is good news. Excellent work Tartarus," the Prophet of Truth praised. "So I trust that the Arbiter has been dealt with?"

"Yes, Holy One. The Arbiter is no more." Tartarus knelt in front of the Prophets and bowed his head.

"And where is the Icon?"

Tartarus held out his hand, which contained the glowing green stick.

"Very good. The Great Journey is at hand, and all the Covenant has you to thank, Tartarus." Truth reached out and took the Icon from Tartarus. "There is one last step before the Great Journey can begin. We must unite the Icon with the Core in Halo's control room, and that is our last task for you Tartarus."

"It is an honor," Tartarus bowed his head again, "but why are you not going yourselves?"

"We are going to the Human's planet to finish the battle," the Prophet of Mercy chimed in with pride. "We hope to make short work of their planet, but if we take longer than expected starting the Great Journey in the middle of glorious battle will be even better."

"And what of the Humans?" asked Tartarus.

"You will take them with you," said Truth. "According to the Oracle, we need one of them for the consecration."

"Are you sure?"

"As hard as it is to believe, yes. We need at least one of them to start the Great Journey."

It looked like the female Human was trying to say something about this, but she could not make a sound due to the special gag the Jiralhanae had put on her. The Prophets ignored her.

"Very well, Noble Truth," said Tartarus reluctantly. "I will take them both and decide which one we need when we get there."

"Good," aid Truth. "Now that the Icon has been claimed and the Great

Journey is around the corner we must make an announcement to the entire Covenant on High Charity. You go take the Humans and watch over them; Mercy and I will come get you when we are ready to leave."

"Yes, Holy One," Tartarus bowed once more and rose to his feet. He turned and barked a command for the group to leave. They obeyed and left the Hierarchs alone in their Sanctum.

3. Ch 2: The Sermon

****Chapter 2: The Sermon****

Covenant Holy City of High Charity

8th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation (Covenant Holy Calendar)

0455 hours, October 27, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

Tartarus was pacing back and forth in one of High Charity's detention blocks looking into each cell as he passed them by. Each of the cells only had metal bars as doors that Tartarus did not think would be very secure.

One of the cells he passed by had an energy shield behind the bars, and behind the shield was a group of three Unngoy. None of them had masks or methane tanks, which was the reason for the energy shield. They were sitting huddled in the corner of the cell conversing about something in their native tongue. Tartarus paid no attention to them as he patrolled.

Many of the cells were empty, and the only ones left in the cells were the Unngoy, Kig-yar, and the two Humans. All of the Sangheili prisoners had been taken away to be executed because of the Prophets' orders to eliminate every single one of their species. Tartarus always had a secret hatred for that race.

The Prophets of Truth and Mercy looked around the council chamber as they rose up on the lift. The chamber was empty save for several of the Jiralhanae Honor Guard and two Unngoy working the monitor that would record and broadcast the Prophets' message to the entire Covenant.

Outside the council chamber, hundreds of Unngoy and Kig-yar were trying to get in to see the Prophet's announcement up close, but the scores of Honor Guard were not letting anyone past due to the Prophet of Truth's request to have the chamber vacant during his speech.

Inside, Truth had signaled for the little Unngoy to start recording.

"Creatures of the Covenant, we have recently had some unfortunate incidents occur within our Covenant, yet there have also been a few events to celebrate. Brother Mercy and I regret to inform all of you that the Sangheili have betrayed us. They have neglected their duty

to protect the Prophets, and in doing so allowed the Prophet of Regret to die by the hands of the Demon.

"Shortly after my decision to recommission the Honor Guard of the Prophets to the Jiralhanae, the Sangheili threatened to quit the High Council saying that the change of the guard was an outrage. And since we recently learned of the Arbiter's failure to claim the Sacred Icon, the Sangheili councilors followed through with their threat declaring that the Arbiter had been purposely sent to his death. That is utterly false. Mercy and I had the utmost confidence that the Arbiter would succeed with all of the support that we sent with him. But with this unfortunate turn of events, the Sangheili have seceded from the Covenant and have openly declared war on us. But do not fear. We will prevail as we always have.

"When we learned of the Arbiter's death, we sent the Jiralhanae down to Halo to retrieve the Sacred Icon. However, when they had arrived, they discovered that the Sangheili had released the Flood to try to prevent the Jiralhanae from securing the Icon. We are, all of us, gravely concerned. The release of the parasite was unexpected, unfortunate, but there is no need to panic. In truth, this is a time to rejoice, a moment that all the Covenant should savor, for the Sacred Icon has been found! With it our path is clear, our entry into the Divine Beyond guaranteed. The Great Journey is nigh, and nothing, not even the Flood, can stop it."

As soon as Truth had finished his speech, a cylinder of pulsating yellow light appeared on the podium behind the two Unngoy at the monitor. A large figure clad in green armor had emerged from the light when it had dissipated. The Prophets immediately recognized the figure, which had just scared the Unngoy technicians.

"Kill the Demon!" Truth yelled at the Jiralhanae next to him. Two other Jiralhanae put their pikes in front of the Hierarchs in an attempt to shield them, but moments later, the Prophets were on their way down the lift.

"Hurry, Brother Mercy," said Truth when they had reached the bottom of the lift. "We must find Tartarus and complete the rest of our plan."

Tartarus waited impatiently in the detention block for the Hierarchs arrive. His moment of fame was close. It was the greatest honor ever to be the one to unite the Sacred Icon with the Core and start the Great Journey. He was determined to do whatever it took to complete the task, even if that meant fighting an entire army of Flood single-handedly.

He walked past the Humans' cell and looked in as he went by. The Humans were sitting against opposite walls. From what he overheard of the Humans' conversations with each other, he learned that the female must have been one of their Ship Masters. But the curious thing was that the Humans apparently had two different ranks of Ship Masters: one called a Commander, and the other called a Captain. The female Human in the cell was one of the lesser, a Commander. The other Human was a male and was obviously not as high ranked as the female. All this came as a surprise to Tartarus. He had never heard of a female of any species being able to join their military, much less obtain a

prestigious rank such as Ship Master.

Most of the Humans' conversations had something to do with a planet they called "Earth". After a while, Tartarus concluded that "Earth" must be the planet that the Covenant had just recently attacked, which also happened to be their home world. It wouldn't be around for much longer though. The Prophets would be sure of that.

Unfortunately, the one thing Tartarus was hoping to hear about was news of the Demon, which they called "Master Chief." The Humans did not mention a word about it. The Covenant had received no word about the Demon since the death of the Prophet of Regret. Many were starting to believe that the Demon was dead, but Tartarus knew that if there were no signs that it was dead then it was still alive.

The door at the opposite end of the corridor where Tartarus stood hissed open and the Prophets floated in on their thrones.

"Tartarus!" Truth was almost screaming at him. "Open the Humans' cell! We are leaving right away! The Demon is here!"

"Right away, Holy Ones," Tartarus obliged. All of a sudden, a million questions went through his mind. _The Demon? On High Charity? How did it get here? How many guards has it killed already? Is it still alive?..._

"Come, Humans. We are leaving." Tartarus grabbed them by the arm and pulled them out of the cell. Together the Prophets, Tartarus, and the Humans walked out of the cellblock. On the way out, the two Honor Guard who had been guarding the cellblock entrance followed behind them.

"We must get the Oracle from our private sanctum," Mercy said as the approached a gravity lift. "It will provide you with instructions as you perform your final task."

"Lies!" Kado 'Toromee yelled as he slammed his fist on the communications pod. "I do not, and will not, believe this! We did not release the parasite against the Jiralhanae. They released it on US! The Prophets are spreading these lies to the entire Covenant. And may the Forerunners help them if the Arbiter is still alive."

The Sangheili warrior had blindingly white armor, which signified that he was Covert Operatives Field Master. He had the utmost respect from everyone under his command. He had seen countless battles in his time as a Field Master and the majority of those had been victories. He had even won an encounter with a Demon, which he had a scar to remember it by.

4. Ch 3: Massacre at Omicron Ossirus I

****Chapter 3: Massacre at Omicron Ossirus I****

Omicron Ossirus I, Puerto de Oro

_71st Cycle, 3rd Division, 48th Stage, 8th Age of Reclamation
(Covenant Holy Calendar)_

1645 hours, August 5th, 2547 (UNSC Military Calendar)

"Hold warriors!" Kado 'Toromee held his arm up behind him as his company of 15 Sangheili Covert Operatives stopped dead in their tracks. "The artifact the Prophets want is inside this building and into the ground quite a ways. The Humans have a formidable defense set up inside. We will split up once inside and work our way down. Kaz 'Istrazee, you will lead one half, while I take the other. Once down to the bottom work your way towards the artifact signal. We will meet you there. Eliminate any threats you encounter, and remain hidden until we are together." Eight of the black armored Sangheili disappeared as they activated their camouflage generators. "The rest of you, come with me."

The first group went through the back entrance of the building, while 'Toromee's group went around to the front. They met no resistance as they traveled down the many flights of stairs, but the Field Master knew that once they reached the bottom, a large group of Humans would be waiting for them.

The group had gone through several rooms at the bottom level of the building and had finally seen the Humans fortifying a central room. 'Toromee was thankful for his camouflage; otherwise the Humans would easily have seen him as he looked through the glass door. He saw a faint glimmer of light in the glass door across the room and knew that 'Istrazee's group was waiting for the order to attack. Suddenly, the Field Master burst through the glass door and ran towards the Humans.

Guenther-126 stood at the rear of the lab. The Marines had set up to machine gun turrets behind barricades and had overturned several metal tables on their sides to act as shields also. Everyone had their eyes on the two glass doors on either side of the front of the lab. Behind Guenther was a solid Titanium-A door, which must have led to the Forerunner artifact that ONI wanted to protect.

_This is hopeless, _he thought. _These Marines can't hold this position against wave after wave of Covenant. If only Ronny and Pete were still here, then we might stand a chance. Twenty-six Marines ain't gonna cut it._

Only about half an hour earlier, on the surface of Omicron Ossirus I, a battle had been fought and lost within three hours. The attack had come so suddenly that the group of six Covenant ships consisting of 3 frigates, two destroyers, and an assault carrier had met no resistance above the planet and had immediately launched scores of Phantoms toward the planet. Minutes after the Covenant's arrival, ten UNSC cruisers entered the space around Omicron Ossirus I and engaged the Covenant. Unfortunately, the Covenant were expecting the UNSC's arrival and had fired one them less than two minutes after the UNSC ships appeared. The UNSC was expecting a tough fight, but what became of that battle was a slaughter.

The UNSC immediately lost four of its cruisers to the Covenant's plasma torpedoes making the sides "even". Luckily they were in such

loose formation that the demolished ships didn't drift into the live ones. The captains of the remaining ships tried to calm the calamity on their bridges down and managed to fire a volley of MAC rounds at the Covenant. Twelve white-hot bolts streaked across the blackness of space towards Covenant ships. Four of the heavy rounds completely missed, while the remaining eight impacted their targets. The two destroyers were hit first. They took two rounds each before their shields flickered out, and a third round to each turned out to be fatal. The assault carrier was able to withstand the two rounds that hit it.

Shortly after the MAC volley had hit, the Covenant launched their torpedoes again. As the red balls of energy sped towards the UNSC vessel, they were able to attempt evasive maneuvers. The reaction of the UNSC captains proved to be too slow, as the plasma torpedoes impacted another four cruisers.

"Shit!" Captain Joseph Sorenson cursed as he saw the other cruisers ignite into balls of plasma and flame. His ship, the Alexander, was lucky enough to have evaded two of the plasma torpedoes that had targeted it, but once the torpedoes passed they veered away and struck the Bismarck, which was about fifty kilometers off the port side of the Alexander. The crew seems relatively calm considering our current situation, thought the Captain. "Lieutenant Crane, make your heading one-eight-five degrees."

"Aye, sir," replied Crane. "Heading one-eight-five degrees."

"Lieutenant Simmons," Sorenson turned to around, "Give me one hundred twenty-five percent on the reactors."

"Reactors at one-two-five percent, sir," answered Simmons.

"We need to drop off the Spartans before the Covenant can get at us." There was obvious tension in the Captain's voice. "Apollo, give me a firing solution for the closest frigate."

"Yes, sir." A small figure appeared on a podium in the bridge. He wore a full set of ancient Greek armor with a plumed helmet and holding a long spear. He had a yellowish tint to him. "Firing solution calculated."

"Lieutenant Brown, ready the MAC cannons and Archer pods S through GG. Fire at will."

"Aye, sir," Lieutenant Brown's hands danced across the keyboard. "MAC guns are hot, firing Archer missiles."

Rapid-fire thumps echoed through the hull of the Alexander as over four hundred Archer missiles were launched towards their target. Seconds later, the bridge rumbled as the two MAC cannons spit out their six hundred ton rounds. The crew of the Alexander watched the center viewscreen as the MAC rounds passed the missiles and impacted the Covenant frigate. It took both rounds to take out the shields, but the second round struck the bow of the frigate causing it to start spinning. Soon after, all four hundred fifty Archers hit their target. The lights on the frigate flickered and then went out. There was a loud cheer on the bridge of the Alexander, but it didn't last long when they saw motes of red light collecting along the sides of

the remaining Covenant ships.

"Spartan-126, this is Captain Sorenson," the Captain yelled over the comm. system. "I want you and your team in Pelicans, ready to leave for the surface fifteen minutes ago!"

"Aye aye, Captain," Guenther's deep voice replied over the comm. link. "We're on our way."

"Good. Leave as soon as you're ready. They need you on the surface as soon as possible."

"Aye, sir"

The six Pelicans landed on a landing pad in the middle of a Puerto de Oro, the capital city of Omicron Ossirus, and three Spartans and seventy-two Marines jumped out. Guenther-126 addressed the entire company.

"There is an ONI facility in this city that contains something that cannot fall into the hands of the Covenant. We've been ordered to protect that facility at all costs. When we get there, we will establish a defensive perimeter around the building. It's all up to us to protect this ONI thing and thousands of Covenant are gonna be after us. I know it's a shitty deal, but we got it until reinforcements arrive. I'll brief you more when we get there, now MOVE OUT!"

The company jogged through the streets of Puerto de Oro with Guenther-126 and Peter-073 at the head of the company, and Ronald-022 watching the rear. The building was in the outskirts of the city and surrounded by residential homes and small office buildings. A street ran east to west across the front of the building and another extended north from a T intersection in front of the main entrance. The facility only rose one story above ground level and looked like a huge concrete bunker. Since it was ONI it obviously went down into the earth at least a kilometer as to protect itself from aerial bombardments.

"OK Marines," Guenther's deep voice came from the external speakers on his helmet. "We need two machine gun turrets set up at each corner of the building, rocket jockeys need to get inside and shoot from the windows, and snipers get up on the roof. There should Titanium-A portable barricades inside the facility. We need those on the roof for the snipers, in front of the turrets, and all around the building for cover for the rest of us. I know this position is terrible, but we gotta make the best out of it. Reinforcements should be here within two hours. And if need be, we will retreat into the interior of the building."

Marines ran around frantically setting up equipment. Guenther walked around the facility and helped move heavy objects wherever needed. Pete had gotten up on the roof with the snipers and kept watch for any Covenant activity. Ronny had to move most of the Titanium-A barricades because it took at least ten Marines to move one.

"Guenther!" Pete's voice sounded inside Guenther's helmet. "Covenant

coming the street from the north. Incoming Ghosts three kilometers away. At least twenty of them."

"Let's go Marines. It's time for action," Guenther's voice boomed again. "We got twenty Ghosts inbound from the north. All jockeys get to the North side of the building and fire when they get in range." _Good, _he thought, _the narrow streets should keep them tightly packed making them better targets for the rocket jockeys._

A couple minutes later, twenty rockets erupted from the northern windows of the ONI facility and streaked down the street. Pete watched through his sniper scope as sixteen Ghosts exploded and sent the remaining ones into the buildings on either side of the road. Another wave of Ghosts followed close behind the first and then the infantry came. He looked to either side of the east/west road and saw legions of Covenant infantry marching towards the facility.

"Snipers," Pete said through his external speakers, "watch the east and west sides. The jockeys will cover the north."

Another volley of twenty rockets flew down from north side of the building. Shortly after, twenty white streaks came from the roof and went towards either side of the cross street. Guenther was crouched behind one of the barricades directly in front of the main entrance of the facility so he could see the whole battle.

"Shit!" Pete swore as a purple beam of light passed through the head of the Marine next to him. He looked around and saw several Jackal snipers positioned on rooftops in the distance. "We got snipers on the rooftops! Watch yourselves and take them out!"

Everyone on the rooftop ducked just in time as eight beams passed overhead. Pete got back up and spotted a Jackal through his scope and fired taking it out. He looked around once more and didn't see a single Jackal left on the rooftops.

Ronny was behind the building in case an attack came from the alleyways between the office buildings. He didn't know what was going on in front of the building but it sounded pretty bad. Then he heard Guenther over the radio calling him to the front.

The Covenant had gotten close enough for the turrets to open fire. No matter how many of those bastards they mowed down, more seemed to replace the fallen ones. It reminded Guenther of the time he learned about the battle of Thermopylae between the three hundred Spartan warriors and the ten thousand Persian Immortals. They were called Immortals for a reason: when one of the numerous warriors died, the warrior behind took his place and it continued like that until they had exhausted their supply of warriors or had overwhelmed the enemy.

Ronny ran up next to Guenther and let out a long low whistle, "This can't be good, man."

"No, it's not," replied Guenther. "Get behind a barrier and help those Marines."

Ronny ran over to a barricade facing west down the cross street. As soon as he had gotten there, the Covenant had gotten close enough to

open fire. Plasma started to melt away at the street and the barricade as if they were butter. The Marines had strategically placed the barriers so that retreat to the next barriers if the first ones had been destroyed.

"Fall back!" yelled Ronny. The Marines ran back to the second set of barricades and opened fire again.

Guenther looked around. This was getting chaotic. Rockets exploded everywhere at random while the streaks of sniper rounds were scattered in all directions. He crouched behind his barricade, scouted out some targets with his MA5B Assault Rifle, and proceeded to mow them down.

The battle raged on for another thirty minutes when the Marine forces had started to wear thin. The snipers were down from the roof and carried MA5B's, as did the rocket jockeys. They were starting to retreat inside the building when they realized that the Covenant forces were also depleting. However, when they had just gotten their hopes up, two pairs of Hunters came from either side of the cross street.

"GET INSIDE NOW!" screamed Guenther at the Marines. They obliged and retreated to the interior while Guenther, Pete, and Ronny provided covering fire against the Hunters. It proved useless as the Hunters did not even budge and returned fire.

The yellow-green blobs of light sped towards the Spartans as they tried to cover the Marines' retreat. Ronny and Pete both took two hits in the chest and flew back into the side of the concrete building. Guenther looked back and saw that both men had gaping holes in their chests. Instinct told him to turn around and fire again, but those Hunters were just too damn powerful. He ran towards the door of the building and realized the Marines were in the windows firing at the Hunters.

Guenther may have been fast, but not quite fast enough. When the Hunters fired again, one of the shots grazed his back right before he dove inside the door. The annoying beep of his low shield warning blared in his helmet as he rolled across the lobby of the facility. He heard four thumps as he got up and saw four Marines holding Jackhammer rocket launchers out the window. He walked up to the window and saw nothing but immobile bodies of Covenant and Humans alike. He turned around and looked at the Marines in the lobby.

Twenty-six, he thought. _Twenty-six is all that's left? If they come back, it's gonna be with even more. It'll be a massacre._ He walked towards a large service elevator in one corner of the lobby. "Marines," he announced, "the Covenant will be back, and madder than ever. Whatever it is that they want here, they want it bad. But we won't let them have it, will we Marines!"

A resounding "No, sir!" was heard in the lobby as the Marines replied in unison.

"What we need to do is descend to the bottom floor of this facility where this thing is kept and set up another defense. We can hold out there until help arrives."

But what Guenther didn't know, was that the reinforcements would never come. They had arrived in the system an hour after the Covenant's reinforcements arrived. And instead of fighting their way to the planet's surface, the UNSC fleet of twenty ships initiated the Cole Protocol and jumped out of the system. Twenty UNSC ships never would have stood a chance against the thirty plus Covenant ships that orbited Omicron Ossirus I.

Spartan-126 started to wonder what was going on above them on the surface. It had been half an hour since they descended into the ONI facility. Either the Covenant should have attacked again by now, or the UNSC reinforcements should have arrived and rescued them. But neither has happened, and that worried Guenther.

Suddenly, the glass on the doors of either side of the room shattered and the marines opened fire on what seemed to be nothing. Guenther then saw the faint blurs coming into the room from the door. A blue flash appeared from one of the blurs and formed into the shape of a sword. Bursts of superheated plasma came from nowhere and started to melt the barricades and tables.

"Elites!" Guenther shouted. One by one, the forms of Elites coalesced from the blurs as their camouflage generators overloaded. "Pick your targets and fire at will." He then looked around the room and realized that half of the Marines had been taken out already.

All of a sudden, Guenther saw the energy sword coming at him, raised and ready to strike. He raised his Assault Rifle and pressed the trigger, but the Elite was too close so he only got a few rounds off before he bashed the side of the Elites head with the butt of his rifle. The Elite materialized in front his face and swiped the sword down, but the Spartan was faster and he grabbed the Elite's wrist in the air. Guenther dropped his rifle and grabbed the Elite's shoulder with his right hand, spun him around, and pinned him against the door behind them.

The Demon is faster and stronger than I expected, thought Kado 'Toromee as he was spun around and smashed against the door. He barely dodged his head out of the way when the Demon tried to smash his helmet into 'Toromee's. He was suddenly thrown to the right and hit the wall with so much force that he dropped his sword. The glowing blue blade disappeared before it hit the ground. The Field Master didn't have enough time to pick his sword up, because as soon as he looked up the Demon was upon him. The Demon swung his fist at 'Toromee's face and hit with so much force that his shield drained immediately and the two mandibles on his left jaw completely broke off and flew across the room. The force of the punch surprised him so much that he rolled to the side, which happened to be to his advantage because when the Demon swung again, the lack of resistance threw him off balance. This gave 'Toromee enough time to regain his composure and tackle the already off balance Demon.

The Field Master was caught by surprise again. He did not expect the Demon's armor to weigh a full unit (half ton). But he was successful in tackling it. They rolled on the floor together once before 'Toromee threw the Demon against the wall. He saw the hilt of his

energy sword on the ground, picked it up, and squeezed it. A blue flash erupted from the hilt as the sword came to life again. The Demon had gotten up and started to run at 'Toromee, and vice versa. The Field Master lifted his sword in the air to strike, but the Demon grabbed onto his wrist again and looked like he was about to throw another punch. But 'Toromee was more alert this time and grabbed the fist with his free hand. The two of them stood there for a while with each other's arms in a vise, trying to wrestle each other to the ground.

After a minute or so, 'Toromee started to feel weak. He wondered how this particular Human was so strong. Or if it was even Human. Suddenly, 'Toromee stopped his struggle and ducked. The Demon was taken by surprise again and flipped head over heels over the Field Master. He landed on his back and absent-mindedly let go of 'Toromee's arms. The Field Master spun around, but the Demon was already up. This time he decided to go in low. He lunged forward with his sword and succeeded in plunging it into the Demon's stomach. The Demon didn't even flinch as the sword impaled him and he slammed his fist against 'Toromee's shoulder, sending him flying against the wall. The Demon kept on running and swung another fist at 'Toromee but only hit the wall. The Field master had ducked again and sliced at the Demons legs, severing them at the knees. He rolled out of the way as the Demon's body crashed to the floor in a heap.

'Toromee stood up and looked around. The battle was already over. Human bodies were strewn all over the floor. He counted the remaining Sangheili. There were twelve left, including himself. It was a successful battle, but he would have liked to win the battle without any Sangheili casualties. And that struggle with the Demon was too close. He would remember that encounter for many ages.

"That was exhilarating, was it not?" one of the Sangheili said to another.

"Indeed!" the other replied. "How many did you kill?"

"I killed three. What about you?"

"Ha! I outdid you with four."

"Silence, warriors," the Field Master announced. "We were victorious, yes. But four of our brethren are dead. This is no time to celebrate, especially when we haven't completed our mission yet. Let us continue on and retrieve the artifact for the Prophets."

He turned, opened the Titanium-A door, and walked through. The other Sangheili followed behind him as they walked the dark corridor silently and invisibly.

5. Ch 4: The Prophets' Escape

Chapter 4: The Prophets' Escape

Covenant Holy City High Charity

8th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation (Covenant Holy Calendar)

0630 hours, October 27, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

The Prophets and their escort hurried through the halls of High Charity toward one of the many Phantom docks. Tartarus led the group with the Prophets of Truth and Mercy following. Two Honor Guard were next pushing the two Humans along and one of them had the Oracle under his arm. And two more Honor Guards that they had picked up in the Prophets' sanctum were guarding the rear.

"Brother Truth," Mercy spoke up, "I think the Covenant needs to hear your voice. This is a very difficult crisis and they need you to reassure them that we will be triumphant."

"Your right, Brother Mercy," Truth replied. "The Covenant does need reassurance. I shall continue my announcement while we make our way to towards the Phantoms, the announcement during which I was so rudely interrupted by the Demon."

The group came to an intersection and turned to the right. Suddenly they were face-to-face with a group of six Sangheili warriors.

"Holy Ones!" Tartarus yelled, "Continue on our previous path. You can reach the dock that way. I will meet you there."

The Prophets and two of the Jiralhanae Honor Guard turned back towards the intersection and turned right again while Tartarus and the other two Jiralhanae clashed with the Sangheili.

Once the Prophets were far enough from the skirmish Truth thumbed a button on the armrest of his throne. What he said after could be heard throughout the entire city.

"Fear not my brothers, for the Sacred Icon is secure. It was Tartarus and his Jiralhanae who took the Icon from the Flood. For this, they have our thanks."

A door in the side of the hallway automatically opened and the form of a dead and mangled body of a Sangheili warrior flew out and hit the wall. The Prophets briefly looked in on their way by and saw two Jiralhanae engaging in hand-to-hand combat with two more Sangheili.

"The Sangheili have failed to protect the Prophets, and in so doing put all our lives at risk. Let no warrior forget his oaths. Thou, in faith, will keep us safe whilst we find the path. And with my blessings, the Jiralhanae now lead our fleets. They ask for your allegiance, and you shall give it to them."

The Prophets then saw a trio of Kig-Yar patrolling the hallway and walking towards them. They hissed their appreciation towards the Prophets in their native language and asked for a blessing. The Prophets stopped and the Kig-Yar kneeled in front of them. The Prophets touched each of them on their heads and then their shoulders while saying, "While the Prophets guide you, may the Forerunner watch over you as you walk the path to glorious salvation."

The Honor Guards with them were getting impatient. One of them said, "Noble Hierarchs, we have no time for this. We must get to the docks."

The Prophets quickly finished their blessings and continued on, and Truth pressed the broadcast button again.

"Creatures of the Covenant, the path is clear, and we shall walk it side by side. At this moment, the Council is gathered on Halo to see the Icon safely placed."

Suddenly, Tartarus's voice could be heard throughout High Charity, "Rise, my brothers! Cast down the Sangheili!"

Truth continued as if he hadn't heard Tartarus, "There are those who said this day would never come. What have they to say now?"

"Once the towers are clear, we'll drive them from the lower districts," came Tartarus's voice again. Truth and Tartarus continued back and forth over the broadcasting channels.

"I have listened to the Oracle, and it has confirmed now: the Great Journey begins at Earth."

"The Sangheili are falling back to the mausoleum. Fools! Their Arbiter can do nothing for them now."

"Who will doubt the Prophets? What have we foretold that has not come to pass?"

The Prophets then came to a hole in the ground, floated over it, and gracefully descended down the gravity lift. When they neared the bottom, the tube of the gravity lift ended and they could see the dock below and most of High Charity in the distance. They reached the bottom and walked over to the three Phantom dropships waiting for them.

"We will wait for Tartarus here," said Truth. "He should be arriving soon."

As the Prophets waited, one of the Guards standing with them suddenly spotted a large grey object that apparently crashed into the outer wall of High Charity.

"What is that?" he pointed at the large object.

"It looks like a Human vessel, doesn't it Mercy?" Truth asked.

"Yes, it does," replied the other Prophet. "But how would a Human vessel be able to enter High Charity?"

"I don't know, Brother. But that must be how the Demon was able to get inside and terrorize the city."

After a few more minutes of waiting, Tartarus and his two Jiralhanae guards with the Humans came down the gravity lift and walked over to the Prophets.

"Split them up," Tartarus ordered. "One in each Phantom."

One of the Jiralhanae smacked the male Human on the side of the head and pushed him towards the Phantom on the right. The other took the Oracle and the female Human to the middle Phantom.

Tartarus walked up to the Prophet of Truth, knelt in front of him, and bowed his head.

"The hopes of all the Covenant rest on your shoulders Chieftain," truth said as he pulled the Icon out of the holder in his throne. He handed it to Tartarus.

"My faith is strong," Tartarus looked up to take the Icon. "I will not fail." He bowed again.

But just as Tartarus took the Icon, a swarm of Flood infection forms crawled over one edge of the platform. Tartarus saw this out of the corner of his eye and quickly stood up. He barked a command to the two Honor Guards standing near and they got into a line. When the little squid-like bubbles were close enough, the Jiralhanae started smashing them to bits with their hands and feet. Unfortunately, one of the infection forms managed to get past the huge guards and latched onto the Prophet of Mercy's long neck. Mercy screamed and fell out of his throne as the infection form pierced his neck with a long spindly tentacle. Mercy felt the tentacle searching inside his neck and find his spinal cord. He let out another blood curdling scream as the infection form injected its DNA into his spinal cord.

Tartarus heard the screams and turned around. He saw Mercy lying on his back on the ground with the parasite attached to his neck. Tartarus reached down to remove the parasite but Truth told him to stop.

"Let him be," Truth commanded. He looked at Mercy on the floor, "the Great Journey waits for no one, Brother. Not even you."

Truth and his two Honor Guard turned and entered the Phantom on the left, but Tartarus hesitated as he watched Mercy struggle with the parasite. He finally turned and entered the middle Phantom.

Mercy still lay on the ground as he watched the blurry vision of the three Phantoms take off and fly away. And seconds later another blurry vision of a green armored figure filled his view. A figure he could never mistake as anything but the Demon. Mercy was very surprised when it spoke to him rather than put a gun to his head.

"Your palâ€| where's he going?" said the Demon.

"Earth," Mercy barely managed to get his mouth to work. "To finish what we started. And this time, none of you will be left behind."

And with that, Mercy's vision went black as the parasite attacked his nervous system. He screamed again when he felt the infection form being pulled from his neck and the tentacle being ripped out. With so much of his nervous system damaged by the Flood and having nothing to sustain him, Mercy passed on to the Divine Beyond.

6. Ch 5: The Great Journey

****Chapter 5: The Great Journey****

Halo Installation 05, Vicinity of the Control Room

8th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation (Covenant Holy Calendar)

0910 hours, October 27, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

"Mine will do," Akkudus heard the deep voice of Tartarus in his headset. "Kill the others!"

"Yes, Chieftain," Akkudus replied. He turned to the Jiralhanae next to him, "A days ration says I do this in one cut." The face of the Human kneeling in front of him turned white, and the two others standing near could do nothing to help.

"Two cuts at least!" said the other.

"Done!"

"Wait! Do you smell that?"

Akkudus sniffed the air for a moment. "Yes, it smells like Sangheili flesh."

They looked to the door at the other end of the platform and saw it open. What came through the door was the biggest surprise Akkudus had seen. A Sangheili dressed in unique ceremonial armor rushed in brandishing his bright energy sword.

"The Arbiter?" Akkudus exclaimed. "How is he still alive?"

However, he never got an answer, nor did he wait for one. Because as soon as Akkudus came to his senses, he dropped his weapons and sprinted at the Arbiter on all fours. Little did he know that the Arbiter had rescued a few prisoners before he assaulted the platform. Behind the Arbiter were two silver-armored Praetor Sangheili and two Lekgolo brothers. Despite Akkudus's efforts to take out the Arbiter quickly, he found himself in the midst of the Arbiter's entourage. Akkudus may have had incredible strength but the Arbiter's superior agility proved to be too fast for the bulky Jiralhanae. He flailed his huge fists wildly about when he found himself surrounded. He had hoped to knock one of the Praetors out, but before he could hit anything one of the Lekgolo brought his massive shield down on Akkudus's head successfully crushing it.

The five other Jiralhanae were slower to react to the new threat. They turned and fired their plasma rifles and grenade launchers in the general direction of the Arbiter and his warriors. As soon as the Jiralhanae were distracted, the Human that was kneeling got up and ran up onto the massive Scarab digger that was docked at the platform while the two other Humans ran for cover.

The Jiralhanae's efforts were useless as one by one they fell to the energy swords of the Sangheili and the Lekgolo's fuel rod cannons. The battle was over in a matter of seconds. When all of the Jiralhanae were dead, the Arbiter wondered where the Humans were. He greatly desired to kill some Humans because of their involvement in the destruction of the first Sacred Ring. It was because of them that he now wore the Mark of Shame. But then he came to when he saw that the Scarab had started to move.

"Listen," a gruff, Human voice came from the Scarab. The Arbiter turned to face the Scarab and the voice continued, "You don't like me, and I sure as hell don't like you. But if we don't do something, Mr. Mohawk's gonna activate this ring, and we're all gonna die."

"Tartarus has locked himself inside the control room," the Arbiter stated.

"Well, I just happened to have a key," replied the Human. As he said that, the Scarab's "eye" opened wide and revealed the main cannon.

The gigantic Scarab had enough firepower to blast its way through a mountain. The Covenant had deployed three Scarabs on the Human planet they recently attack called Earth. The Scarabs were originally sent to dig for a Forerunner artifact believed to be hidden underground on the planet, but when Earth was discovered to be the Human's home planet the Scarabs were used against the Human military forces. The diggers destroyed even the toughest of Human armor with ease and were themselves nearly impenetrable to the Human projectile weapons. They had wreaked havoc on the surface of Earth for hours until the Humans had figured out how to take one down by boarding it and killing its crew. This resulted in the withdrawal of the other two Scarabs. They were too valuable and too few to be used in war like that.

"Come on," the Human said. "Grab a Banshee and give me some cover. He's gonna know we're coming."

As if on cue, a pair of Banshees flew up to and landed on the platform.

"Take my Banshee, Arbiter!" said the zealous Sangheili who hopped out of the nearest craft. The Arbiter jumped in and pressed a few buttons on the holographic panel. The canopy closed and the Banshee took off.

Sergeant Major Avery Johnson looked at the holographic controls inside of the Scarab and scratched his head. _How the hell to I get this thing to move_, he thought. Everything was written in the strange runes he had seen all over the place on both Halos. He still didn't know what any of them meant. He got lucky when he had opened the Scarab's eye. He picked a random holographic button and pressed his finger against it. The Scarab started to lower itself. There was a horrible grinding noise as the main cannon of the huge machine got caught on the platform. Johnson quickly pushed the button above the one he just pushed and the Scarab returned to its original position. _Note to self: Never push that button again_, Johnson said to himself. He finally found a little glowing strip of blue, and he pressed his finger on the bottom of it. The Scarab began to slowly move backwards. Johnson looked at rear viewscreen and saw that he was approaching a cliff. _Uh oh, better figure out how to stop this thing_. He put his finger on the bottom of the vertical blue strip again and moved his finger toward the middle. The four-legged behemoth slowed to a halt. He looked around and found a blue doughnut shape. He wondered if this worked the same way as the strip and he put his finger on the top and moved it around the circle ninety

degrees to the right. To the Sergeants surprise, the Scarab rotated like his finger did. _Alright! I think I'm getting the hang of this_.

When the Scarab finished turning, Johnson looked at the forward viewscreen and saw three Wraith tanks preparing to fire at him. He looked around for the button to fire and decided that the big red one in the middle of the panel looked the most inviting. He pressed it. Johnson heard a loud whining sound as the Scarabs main cannon started to collect plasma. He saw tiny blue motes of light going towards the top of the viewscreen, and suddenly a blue stream of pure destruction burst forth from the main cannon and filled the viewscreen. The Sergeant had to look away because of the intensity of the light, but when he looked back after the noise stopped he saw a large crater in the cliff face in front of him and the indistinguishable remains of the three Covenant Wraith tanks.

"Ha!" Johnson said into the Scarabs microphone. "How do you like it?"

Sergeant Johnson returned to the control panel and pressed his finger to the top of the vertical strip. The gigantic Scarab moved forward with a certain grace only seen in Covenant vehicles. He surprised himself at how well he was able to maneuver the massive bug-like machine through the narrow gorge with only meters to spare on either side. Johnson felt a sort of bloodlust now that he controlled an eight story tall machine of pure destruction.

In the forward viewscreen, Johnson saw the Banshee controlled by that ceremonially armored Elite engage three other Banshees controlled by Brutes. _Damn, that guy's good_, he thought as the Elite destroyed one of the enemy Banshees and successfully evaded fire from the other two. Johnson had seen the Elite from inside the Scarab take down two Brutes with relative ease. It's no wonder he had that special armor.

Johnson rounded a corner in the gorge and saw that it opened up to reveal a wide beach several hundred meters in front of him. A few hundred more meters off the beach was a large building. The building consisted of a large sphere with a ring around it and two tall triangular spikes that looked like the sails on a sailboat. Johnson concluded that this must be the control room where that Brute with the Mohawk was. He continued on down to the beach while trying to draw a bead on anything that moved, but that Elite in the Banshee always destroyed whatever Johnson had his sights on before he could fire. But he finally got a chance to destroy something when he reached the beach.

"Stay clear of the door," Johnson yelled into the microphone. "Hey, bastards! Knock-Knock!"

The Sergeant aimed at the door of the control room and pressed the big red fire button. The loud whine started up again and Johnson looked away as the blue beam shot forth again. When he looked back, the area of the wall of the building that used to hold the door was now only a smoldering hole. He saw the Elite's Banshee fly towards the hole and decided he better get out and find a Banshee for himself and follow the Elite inside.

The Arbiter stood outside of a door in the control room building. He heard footsteps on the other side. He waited for a while to think. Several times during his flight to the control room building he had wanted to kill the Human in the Scarab. But as much as he hated to admit it, he needed the Human as an ally right now. He wouldn't let revenge get the best of him.

The Arbiter activated his camouflage and quietly entered the room. He snuck up behind a group of Jiralhanae standing together, and even though he was in plain site of a few of them they still didn't see him. He placed a plasma grenade on the back of one, and dove out of the way. The other Jiralhanae noticed the plasma grenade but it was too late. The blue explosion sent the six Jiralhanae flying several meters from where they were standing. When they landed, none of them moved. The sound of the explosion was heard in the next room and six more Jiralhanae entered the room, several of them wearing the armor of the Honor Guard. A moment before they entered, the Arbiter's camouflage generator overloaded and shut off. _Perfect timing. Curse this old armor_, he said to himself.

"Do not let the Arbiter enter the chamber!" one of the Honor Guards said as he saw the Arbiter. "The Chieftain must complete his holy work!"

The Arbiter immediately took out his energy sword and ran at the Jiralhanae. His first swipe took off the head of the first Jiralhanae and came down to cut another's right arm off. As he ran past the group his shields were being pelted by plasma fire. He rolled through the open door and down the ramp behind the group. His camouflage generator had enough time to cool down, so when the door closed he activated it once more. The door opened again and the four remaining Jiralhanae ran through. As they ran past the invisible Arbiter, he stuck a plasma grenade to the forehead of one of the Honor Guards and ducked in a corner. The guard with the grenade on his face screamed and ran madly about until the grenade exploded. Two more Jiralhanae were caught in the explosion and were sent headlong into a wall. And once again, the Arbiter's became visible because his camouflage generator overheated.

One last Honor Guard remained. He threw his plasma rifle down and charged the Arbiter like a huge gorilla. The Jiralhanae swung his fist at the Arbiter as he went past, but the Arbiter dodged. However, this particular beast was surprisingly agile for his size. He was able to stop himself, turn, and swing his fist over his head and hit the Arbiter in the shoulder before the Arbiter could dodge again. The Arbiter's shields hadn't had enough time to replenish themselves, so he felt the tremendous blow.

The Jiralhanae are some of the strongest creatures that exist in the known universe. Few species come close to matching their strength. In fact, they are so strong and their hides are so thick that they rarely ever wear armor during battle. Even a mighty Lekgolo, who could easily take on a Jiralhanae in hand-to-hand combat, has to wear armor to protect the fragile creatures that live inside.

The Arbiter pulled his sword out and swung it around to cut off the Honor Guard's head, but the guard ducked and rolled out of the way. The Arbiter felt his knees buckle as the Jiralhanae swept his legs out from under him. The Arbiter landed on his back and rolled as the

Jiralhanae's fists smashed the floor where he just lay. He rose to his feet and slashed his sword at the guard's belly. It lightly grazed the Jiralhanae as he jumped backwards. The guard tried to counterattack but the Arbiter again showed his superior agility and in a spinning move slashed at the Jiralhanae's stomach again and succeeded in slicing him in half.

Once the Arbiter had disposed of the Jiralhanae guards, he continued to the control room hoping he wasn't too late. The control room was truly a sight to behold. The huge spherical room was about two hundred fifty meters across and had a deep hole in the bottom. A large circular platform floated in the exact middle of the room and a glass walkway extended out towards the platform with a control panel at the end. The Arbiter could see Tartarus and four Jiralhanae Captains next to him. One of the Captains had the Oracle under his arm, and Tartarus had his hand on the shoulder of a small Human female. It looked like he was trying to get her to do something. The Arbiter could hear them arguing as he walked in.

"Please! Use caution!" the Oracle exclaimed. "This Reclaimer is delicate."

Tartarus looked at the Oracle, "One more word, Oracle, and I'll rip your eye from its socket." Then he returned his gaze to the Human. He tightened his grip on her shoulder and she let out a sharp grunt of pain. "Which is nothing compared to what I'll do to you."

"Tartarus, stop!" the Arbiter shouted as he walked in. He stopped a good ten meters away for safety.

"Impossible!" Tartarus turned around to face the Arbiter—the same Arbiter he had killed several days before.

"Put down the Icon," the Arbiter demanded.

"Put it down? And disobey the Hierarchs?"

"There are some things about Halo even the Hierarchs do not understand."

This hit a nerve in Tartarus's guards. They growled loudly and stepped towards the Arbiter, but Tartarus put up a hand to stop them. "Take care, Arbiter," he said. "What you say is heresy."

"Is it?" the Arbiter asked. "Oracle! What is Halo's purpose?"

"Collectively," the Oracle started, "the seven—"

Tartarus grabbed the Oracle before it could continue and brought the blue glowing ball inches from his face as he growled.

"Not another word!" Tartarus ordered.

"Please!" everyone looked towards the owner of this new voice. The Arbiter turned his head to see the Human that drove the Scarab. "Don't shake the light bulb," the Human continued.

The Jiralhanae beside Tartarus growled and stepped forward again, but stopped short once more when the Human spoke again.

"If you wanna keep your brain inside your head, I'd tell those boys to chill."

Tartarus barked a quiet command to his warriors in his native tongue and they lowered their weapons. Once the Human was content, he continued again.

"Go ahead," he said to the Arbiter. "Do your thing."

"The Sacred Rings," the Arbiter tried again, "What are they?"

"Weapons of last resort," explained the Oracle, still in Tartarus's grip, "Built by the Forerunners to eliminate potential Flood hosts, thereby rendering the parasite harmless."

"And those who made the rings?" asked the Arbiter. "What happened to the Forerunners?"

"After exhausting every other strategic option, my creators activated the rings. They, and all additional sentient life in three radii of the galactic center, diedâ€¦ as planned. Would you like to see the relevant data?"

"Tartarus," the Arbiter said gravely, "The Prophets have betrayed us."

Tartarus took a moment to think it over, but his stubborn mind wouldn't let anything sway his opinion. He threw the Oracle at the Human behind the Arbiter who flew backwards from the blow. He then took the Icon, placed it on the control panel in front of them and forced the other Human's hands to push the Icon into the slot in the panel. Tartarus turned around to face the Arbiter and grabbed his hammer that lay beside him.

"No, Arbiter!" Tartarus said triumphantly. "The Great Journey has begun! And the Jiralhanae, not the Sangheili, Shall be the Prophets' escort!"

And with that, an energy shield that looked like a blue-white flame erupted around Tartarus, and the clamps that held the platform in the middle of the room opened. The one platform separated into three tiers and a blue light shot up the middle of them. Two pairs of small rectangular platforms started to rotate in opposite directions around the outside of the middle platform.

Tartarus's guards opened fire. But to the Arbiter's surprise, they did not fire at him, but at the newly arrived Sangheili that charged past him. The mixture of gold armored Field and Ship Masters and black armored Commandos made quick work of the Jiralhanae Captains and followed Tartarus as he jumped the five meter wide gap between the glass walkway and the middle, and largest, platform.

"Arbiter!" the Arbiter turned to see another gold armored Sangheili. "By the Rings! We all thought you were dead! What are you doing here?"

"I should be asking you the same. But there is no time for explanations. We have a very serious problem on our hands," said the Arbiter.

"Right, we have a foul beast to kill! Let's go, Arbiter!" the golden armored Sangheili unleashed his energy sword and sprinted toward the end of the walkway and jumped the gap to the platform. The Arbiter had no choice but to do the same.

When the Arbiter landed on the platform he saw that the Sangheili had already engaged Tartarus in the middle of the platform. They ran around him in circles firing their plasma rifles at him. However, his energy shield was impervious to the incoming fire. One of the Commandos finally pulled out a sword and charged Tartarus who in turn dodged the thrust and smashed the Sangheili with his hammer. The blow was so powerful that the Sangheili was thrown off the platform. After seeing this, the Arbiter thought it would be better to stay off to the side and wait. But one by one, the other Sangheili were thrown off the edge by Tartarus's hammer. The Tartarus saw the Arbiter off to the side.

"What? Is the mighty Arbiter afraid?" taunted Tartarus.

The huge beast ran towards the Arbiter and prepared to swing his hammer but at the last second another wave of high-ranking Sangheili jumped to the circular platform. They landed next to the Arbiter and distracted Tartarus. All this was happening while the ring prepared to fire, and the Oracle dictated every step of the firing sequence.

"Charging sequence initiated," announced the Oracle. "Primary generators coming on-line."

"Well shut them down!" ordered the female Human. She and the Oracle were on one of the small rotating platforms.

"Apologies," replied the Oracle. "Protocol does not allow me to interfere with any aspect of the sequence."

"Then how do I stop it?" the Human sounded frantic.

"Well, it will take some time to go over the proper procedures. I-"

"Quit stalling!"

"Under more controlled circumstances, I would suggest the Reclaimer simply remove the Index."

"That's it? Johnson! I'm on it!"

"Hang tight ma'am!" the male human on the walkway said. "Not until the Brute is dead!"

When the second wave of Sangheili had been eliminated, Tartarus ran at the Arbiter again. The Arbiter, finally forming a plan, activated his camouflage and rolled out of the way of Tartarus's hammer. When the Arbiter got up, he saw three purple beams hit Tartarus in rapid succession. The glowing shield that surrounded Tartarus suddenly

disappeared.

"Hey, Mohawk!" yelled the Human from the walkway. "How'd that feel?"

"A lucky hit," Tartarus yelled back. "You shall not land another."

Tartarus ran towards the center of the platform and floated up the beam of light to the top tier.

"Secondary generators charging," the Oracle continued his dictation. "All systems are performing well within operational parameters."

The Arbiter then saw three more Jiralhanae on the far side of the platform that must have come in from another entrance. He switched off his camouflage and put his sword away for the moment. He took his plasma rifle and exchanged fire with the nearest Jiralhanae. The Arbiter landed a few shots on the Jiralhanae's face eating through the thick hide. The first Jiralhanae fell to the ground and the other two hopped over him still coming towards the Arbiter. The Arbiter took a plasma grenade and threw it on the next one's chest. When it exploded, battle rage consumed the final Jiralhanae and he charged the Arbiter. But the Arbiter had a trick up his sleeve; he turned his camouflage on and jumped as high as he could. The incoming Jiralhanae was so confounded that he couldn't stop himself from running off the edge and falling nearly a hundred meters.

"Power generation phase complete," the Oracle continued again. "The installation is ready to fire. Starting final countdownâ€¦"

"Come on, Arbiter!" encouraged the Human called Johnson. "Kick that guy's ass!"

"And may I say, Reclaimers, it has been a pleasure to serve you both," the Oracle said regarding the two Humans. "Good byeâ€¦"

Tartarus finally jumped down from the small platform above and looked around for the Arbiter, his shield back to normal. He finally saw him and charged, hammer ready to swing. The Arbiter backed up while firing his fully automatic plasma rifle, but it was all to no avail. Tartarus's run didn't slow. When the Arbiter couldn't back up anymore he realized Tartarus was right on top of him. He dove to one side as Tartarus's hammer smote the floor. The Arbiter quickly recovered from his roll and ran for cover. He knew that if that hammer hit him, he was as good as dead.

"Just like the rest of your race: cowardly and weak," taunted Tartarus as he looked for the Arbiter.

Tartarus walked past a wall and found the Arbiter crouched in a corner. But suddenly Tartarus's shield disappeared.

"Got his shield!" yelled Johnson. "Hit 'im now!"

The Arbiter saw his chance and sprung at Tartarus while pulling his energy sword out. A blue flash erupted from the hilt as he swung it at Tartarus. The sword cut through Tartarus's hammer like a hot knife through butter. Tartarus jumped back in surprise, still holding the

two halves of his hammer. He threw them to the ground and ran head first at the Arbiter hoping to push him off the side of the platform. The Arbiter dodged Tartarus's charge and swiped his sword as he passed. Tartarus skidded to a halt. He put his hand to his side and felt something sticky. He looked down and saw his purple blood oozing from a wide gash in his side. Tartarus became even more enraged and swung a massive fist at the Arbiter's face. His fist made contact and the Arbiter flipped backwards and landed on his stomach several meters away. The Arbiter got up just in time to dodge another charge from Tartarus and swing his sword again. Tartarus stopped and turned, his right arm hung limp and was nearly severed. He started to feel weak from the loss of blood, but still managed to roll out of the way of the Arbiter's counterattack. Unfortunately, the Arbiter was quick on his feet and grabbed onto Tartarus and rolled with him. When Tartarus rose to his feet, the Arbiter was right behind him already swinging his sword at Tartarus's neck. The blade was so quick that the head stayed in place until the body fell over.

When Miranda Keyes had seen the Brute fall, she jumped from her rotating platform to one below going the opposite direction. She looked for an opportunity to jump to the middle platform, but didn't see another rotating platform only a meter above her until it was nearly on top of her. She ducked under it and then jumped to the middle platform. She ran towards the large blue beam of light in the middle. When she was closer she saw the Index floating in the middle of the beam. She reached in and snatched it out. The beam of light immediately disappeared and the entire building started to shake as if in an earthquake. Miranda looked up through the hole in the ceiling and saw a large ball of blue light gathering above the control room. The blue ball suddenly hurtled skyward toward an even larger ball of yellow light gathering in the exact center of the Halo. When the blue comet of light reached the center, the mass of light in the middle expanded to fill the whole sky and then dissipated moments after.

7. Ch 6: Delusions and Grandeur

****Chapter 6: Delusions and Grandeur****

Halo Installation 05, Control Room

8th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation (Covenant Holy Calendar)

1000 hours, October 27, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

"What's that?" Commander Miranda Keyes asked as she looked at the strange, vaguely cylindrical hologram where, previously, an intense beam of blue light was.

"A beacon," replied 343 Guilty Spark, the Monitor of Installation 04. It was a strange series of events that it came to be on Installation 05 where it was now. The destruction of its own installation and its capture by the Covenant. None of which it expected would ever happen.

"What's it doing?" Keyes asked again.

"Communicating," replied the little blue ball, "At superluminal speeds with a frequency of-"

"Communicating with what?" the Commander didn't have time for this.

"The other installations," the Monitor kindly answered.

"Show me," Keyes demanded.

The two halves of the holographic cylinder opened up and seven rings spread out from the center. One of them was tagged with a red marker, signifying that it was out of commission.

"Fail safe protocol," the Monitor started to explain. "In the event of unexpected shut-down, the entire system will move to standby status. All platforms are now ready for remote activation."

"Remote activation? From here?" Keyes had so many questions but the Monitor wasn't helping with all of his ambiguity.

"Don't be ridiculous," Guilty Spark was getting annoyed with the Human's ignorance. She was a Reclaimer. She should know all of this already.

"Listen, Tinkerbell," Johnson gestured to the Monitor. "Don't make me-"

"Then where?" Miranda cut him off. "Where would someone go to activate the other rings?"

"Whyâ€| the Ark, of course," the Monitor apparently thought that was obvious.

"And where, Oracle, is that?" said the tall figure that had walked up behind the Humans. Keyes and Johnson both turned to see the Elite wearing the ceremonial armor, the Arbiter. In all the years they have been at war with the Covenant they have never seen an Elite wear armor like that, nor have they seen an Elite as skilled as the one behind them now.

"I must apologize again," the Monitor said, "for protocol does not allow me to reveal the location of the Ark. Butâ€|" it paused.

"I can't take this anymore," Johnson said angrily. "Everything we ask him to do is not allowed by his stupid protocol." He turned around and stormed off to the edge of the platform.

"Take it easy, Johnson," Miranda said. She turned to the Monitor, "But, what?"

"I thought that you didn't want to fire the rings," said the floating ball. "You just cancelled the firing sequence of this installation. Why would you want to find the Ark?"

"The Prophets must not be allowed to fire the Halos," the Arbiter spoke up again.

"Exactly," Miranda continued the Arbiter's sentence, "so we need to get to this 'Ark' before they do."

"Hey! You two!" Johnson yelled from the edge of the platform. "Come here. We've got ourselves a live one."

"What is it Johnson?" Keyes asked as she and the Arbiter ran to where Johnson was kneeling.

"If I help you up," Johnson said to the creature hanging onto the edge of the platform, "and give you my word that I won't hurt you, will you give me your word that you won't hurt me?"

"Do not touch me, filthy Human," the Elite said. He was hanging on to the edge with one arm. His other arm had been ripped off by the hammer of Tartarus. He was lucky to have been hit in the arm and not the chest because he didn't fly as far as the others and was close enough to the edge to grab on.

"There's a stubborn Elite here hanging onto the edge," Johnson told Keyes as she came up next to him.

"Stand aside, Human," the Arbiter said as he came up behind Johnson. "I'll get him."

Johnson stood and moved out of the way as the Arbiter knelt where he just was. The Arbiter reached down, grabbed onto the other Elite's arm, and pulled him up. The blood from his wound left a purple trail on the ground as he was dragged to safety and pooled where he lay. The golden armored Elite lay on his back for a while trying to recover, when the Arbiter suddenly recognized him. The Arbiter went to the Elite's side and knelt.

"Niko 'Gorlomee? Are you alright Ship Master?" the Arbiter asked.

"I'll make it," 'Gorlomee said. "My wounds will heal. I overheard you talking with the Oracle about the Ark, and I have an idea."

"An idea would be most welcome at this time, Ship Master," the Arbiter said graciously.

"Well," 'Gorlomee started to explain, "I happen to know where the Prophets are going, and I think that if we follow their fleet, we could destroy them. The only problem is that they command a large fleet of Jiralhanae ships at the supposed Human home world."

"Earth!" Miranda gasped. "The other Prophets brought another fleet to Earth!"

"How is that a problem, 'Gorlomee?" asked the Arbiter.

"If we follow the Prophets," the 'Gorlomee explained, "we will have to fight them AND the Humans. Speaking of which, why are those Humans not bound or dead?"

"As hard as it is to believe, they assisted me," the Arbiter said. "And we may need their help. I would like them to remain unharmed for the time being."

"As you wish, Arbiter," the Ship Master said. "And would you mind helping me to my feet?"

The Arbiter grasped 'Gorlomee's arm and pulled him up.

"We need to get you to a medical technician," said the Arbiter. "You are weakening."

"Do you know how many ships the Prophets have at Earth?" Miranda asked 'Gorlomee.

"I am unsure," he answered, "but it can't be much more than two hundred fifty. Of the twelve hundred ships that were guarding High Charity, only about four hundred fifty remain after the battle, and over half of those were Jiralhanae ships that left for your planet. Our current roster of Sangheili ships is at one hundred eighty-two."

"They won't stand a chance against Earth's defenses," the Commander boasted. "We have nearly three hundred orbital defense stations and a fleet of--"

"Watch your mouth, Human!" 'Gorlomee cut her off. "The Jiralhanae ships are not to be underestimated. Of those twelve hundred ships I spoke about earlier, a little more than a third were Jiralhanae controlled, yet they now have more than us. Their tactics are much more aggressive than ours, which allows them to handle a fleet much larger than their own. You must also take into account that they could call for reinforcements from elsewhere in the galaxy. They may seem dense when fighting on land, but they are definitely a force to be reckoned with in space."

"If we take our fleet to Earth, we can try to form an agreement with the Humans seeing as we now have a common enemy," the Arbiter suggested.

"Are you crazy, Arbiter? They would never do such a thing. And I don't imagine that the Covenantâ€¦ I'm sorry, our faction would be too happy with the idea."

"Perhaps I am crazy. And no, the Humans would never sign an agreement if we go ourselves, but we have these two Humans to help with negotiations."

"Hmm, that actually sounds logical. Maybe it will work after all. But how do you suppose we go about doing this?"

"We need to gather the Ship Master of our remaining fleet and decide upon our next actions."

"But what about the Ark?" Keyes finally said.

"We have no time to bother with the Ark," the Arbiter answered. "The Prophets must die!"

Keyes and Johnson didn't dare argue with the Elites. Especially since neither of them were too keen on siding with each other. A petty argument at that time could end in the Humana' death.

"My comrade, Kado 'Toromee, has taken a cruiser from the Jiralhanae not too far from here," the Arbiter said. "We should meet up with him so we can rendezvous with the fleet."

So the Arbiter, Ship Master 'Gorlomee, Commander Keyes, and Sergeant Johnson left the control room the same way they came in and met no Brute resistance. They completely forgot about the Monitor, who was quietly humming as it followed them to the cruiser.

8. Ch 7: The Beginning of the End

****Chapter 7: The Beginning of the End****

Disclaimer: Some ideas in this chapter were taken and altered from another fanfic author with permission.

Unknown Forerunner Flagship near Earth

8th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation (Covenant Holy Calendar)

1145 hours, October 27, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

Master Chief John-117 woke up when he felt his stomach turn. He looked at his mission clock: four hours had passed since he fell asleep. _Damn it, how can we be out of Slipspace already?_ He thought.

Moments before, the Spartan had traversed the winding hallways of the Covenant Holy City of High Charity trying to track down the Prophets of Truth and Mercy. He finally reached the dock they were at but was too late. But he was able to find out from the dying Prophet of Mercy where Truth was going. So the Master Chief made his way up to a power conduit running to the Forerunner ship at the center of the city. As he sped towards the ship through the conduit, the ship started to take off and the conduit disappeared causing John to free-fall the rest of the way. With a moment of luck, he made it into a cargo bay before the doors closed.

Not long after did he feel his stomach turn as the ship entered Slipspace. He knew he had to get to Truth as soon as he could, but he felt so exhausted. Since he arrived at Delta Halo five days ago, he had slept no more than eight hours. He noticed that his reaction speed had slowed slightly and decided he needed some rest. He figured that since they were in Slipspace now, it would be a good two days to reach Earth. Little did he know that the Forerunner ship he was on could traverse the alternate dimension at a much faster speed than the Covenant ship they hid in to get to Delta Halo.

He looked around the large, empty, cylindrical cargo bay. The design along the wall was so intriguing he almost forgot his objective. It looked like a pattern but there were very minute differences with each repetition making each design unique. He shook his head.

Stopping Truth. That's all that matters, Cortana's voice echoed in his mind. He hated leaving her at High Charity. He felt empty without her, as if a part of himself was missing. After he gathered himself together, he got up and started to cautiously walk towards a door to his right.

"We've got a new contact," John heard a voice over his radio, "Unknown classification!"

"It isn't one of ours. Take it out!" a different voice ordered. This new voice sounded like Sir Terrence Hood, a Fleet Admiral of the UNSC. Master Chief decided he'd better say something before his own military blows him to bits.

"This is Spartan one-one-seven!" he said over his helmet's radio. "Can anyone hear me? Over."

"Master Chief?" Admiral Hood replied. "Would you mind telling me what you're doing on that ship?"

"Sir. Finishing this fight," said the Spartan.

"Care to elaborate on that?" Hood had no time to mess around. "I don't work well with ambiguity."

"The Prophet of Truth is on this ship," Master Chief explained. "He is the last Prophet hierarch still alive. I need to find him and kill him."

"Alright," the Admiral said cautiously. "I'm giving you ten minutes to take him out, otherwise I'm sending a boarding party to get you out of there. That thing has destroyed three of our ships already, and I can't have that ship roaming around much longer. We'll try to keep it distracted as long as we can, but there are no guarantees."

"Roger that, sir" Master Chief acknowledged. "I'll radio you with my progress in ten minutes."

"Good luck, Chief. Hood out."

John wondered what he should do now. He somehow had to find a weapon, find his way to the bridge of an unfamiliar ship, get past hundreds of patrolling Brutes, and kill the Prophet of Truth all in ten minutes. Otherwise, he would face his first failure since he lost the race on his first day of training thirty-five years ago.

If Master Chief had Cortana with him, she could scan the ship and create a map of its hallways and rooms for him. But just like the time he had to find Captain Jacob Keyes and traverse the Library on Alpha Halo, he would have to find his way without the super-intelligent AI.

John wandered cautiously through the twisting hallways and stumbled upon an armory. He took his fiber optic probe and stuck it inside the open door. He linked it to his heads up display and saw a group of four jackals patrolling inside with a Brute supervising. The Brute was standing near the door with his back turned. When the Jackals were at the opposite end of the room the Spartan struck. He grabbed the Brute's head and twisted. After a muffled snap came from the Brute's neck, it limply fell to the ground. John quickly grabbed the dropped plasma rifle and a plasma grenade from the Brute's bandolier. He tossed the grenade into the group of Jackals. The Jackals, caught by surprise, dove away from the grenade but three of them were caught in the explosion. The last remaining Jackal hid behind his personal energy shield and fired at the Chief who returned fire with his new

plasma rifle. The Chief fired at the Jackal until his shield overloaded and dissipated. The Jackal caught two plasma bolts in the chest and flopped to the ground dead.

Master Chief looked around the room for any weapons he could use. He found a few Brute Shot grenade launchers and picked one up along with some extra rounds. He discarded his used plasma rifle and replaced it with a new one. He clipped the plasma rifle to his magnetic holster and continued through the hallways with his Brute Shot in hand.

Every time the Master Chief encountered any Covenant resistance, he tried to figure how to surprise them and conserve his ammo. On his way to where he thought the bridge was he killed a considerable amount of Brutes, Jackals, and Drones. He was nearly out of ammo when he rounded a corner and came across four Brute Honor Guard by a closed door about twenty meters down the hallway. He quickly went back around the corner before the Brutes noticed him. _That must be the bridge_, John thought. _Why else would it be so heavily guarded_? There was no way he could sneak up on the guards and he didn't want to risk an all out firefight with very little ammo. He decided it was time to radio Admiral Hood.

"Admiral, this is Master Chief Spartan one-one-seven," John said as he crouched against the wall around the corner from the guards.

"You're early Chief," the Admiral chuckled. "Did you get the Prophet already?"

"No, sir. I'm right outside the bridge. Would it be possible to send that boarding party as reinforcements? If I had a few more men, I could kill, or even capture, the Prophet of Truth."

"Alright, Spartan. You've got the green light to go. I'll see what I can do in terms of reinforcements and send them ASAP. Make your way to the portside hangar to greet the troops."

"Thank you, sir. And could you have them bring some extra munitions for me, I'm out."

"Very well. Oh, and Chief?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I want that Prophet alive and kicking, you understand? And do it fast!"

"Aye, Admiral."

John quickly made his way back the way he came. The hangars had to be around that area of the ship. Luckily he had weakened the security force of the ship trying to find the Prophet. That would give the reinforcements a better chance of surviving.

Two Pelicans carrying twenty-four Orbital Drop Shock Troopers made their way from the geosync defense station _Cairo_ to the strange beige, triangular ship. It looked nothing like the purple, bulbous

ships that made up the entire Covenant fleet. That ship was obviously not Covenant.

The pilots of the Pelicans had a tough time trying to find a hangar to land in because they had no Intel about this ship. And no Intel meant no schematics. They finally found something that looked like a hangar from a Covenant ship. They approached the blue energy shield that covered the open hangar. The hangar was bustling with activity when the shield dissipated. Every Covenant creature working in the hangar was instantly sucked into the vacuum of space clutching their throats as they suffocated. The pilots flew their Pelicans into the Hangar and the energy shield reappeared as they landed.

Once the Pelicans set down, the ODSTs jumped out and secured the perimeter. They saw a figure moving toward them from the back of the hangar.

"Hold your fire men," the green armored figure walked towards them.

"Good to see you Master Chief," an ODST stepped forward and saluted the Chief who returned the gesture. "Staff Sergeant Jim Shank, sir. What's the situation?"

"Many of the Brute guards have been taken out already," the Chief explained. "So it should be easy to get to the bridge. That's where the Prophet of Truth is. We need to capture the prophet and get out, and we need to do it quick. But first I need a better rifle." He tossed away his spent plasma rifle and went to the back of one of the Pelicans and grabbed a few frag grenades and two submachine guns. Once he loaded up, he started to walk out of the hangar.

"Right," Sergeant Shank replied. "Let's get to it. ODSTs, quick strike formation. Chief has point."

The ODSTs fell into two lines of eight behind the Master Chief while the remaining eight guarded the Pelicans. They made their way through the hallways toward the bridge of the Forerunner ship. As they were jogging down a long hallway, they saw a group of four Brutes round a corner towards them up ahead.

"Spread out, find cover, and fire at will!" John yelled.

The ODSTs hid in doorframes and behind pillars against the wall and opened fire at the Brutes. One of the Brutes managed to get a few shots from his plasma rifle off before they were all riddled with bullet holes. An unlucky exposed ODST caught the plasma bolts in his chest and fell to the ground. Staff Sergeant Shank ran to his fallen comrade. The stench of burning flesh overwhelmed him.

"Private Roberts, Private Long, get him back to the Pelicans," Jim ordered. "The rest of you, form up!"

They continued down the hallway John signaled for the group to stop near the end. He snaked his fiber optic probe around the corner and saw the four Honor Guards exactly where they were when he was there earlier. He turned to the ODSTs crouching behind him and held up four armored fingers. Then he pointed to the ground signifying that he'd lure them to their position. The ODSTs formed two lines across the hallway several meters away from the corner, one kneeling, one

standing. The Chief threw a frag grenade around the corner to the middle of the Honor Guards and ran back to the crouching line of ODSTs. Only three of the Brutes rounded the corner and were met with a hail of bullets.

The ODSTs went around the corner and met six more Brutes coming out of the bridge to see what the noise was. The ODSTs took out two of the Brutes before they had to scatter from the returning fire. Many ran back around the corner but others took cover behind the massive bodies of the fallen Brutes. As they scattered, three more ODSTs fell to the bolts of superheated plasma. John threw a frag grenade in the middle of the Brutes taking out another two. The remaining Brutes fell quickly as another volley of bullets came from the Human soldiers.

"Leave the dead," the Staff Sergeant said. "We'll take care of them when we're done."

"We've got to be careful," John said to the Sergeant. "We need to grab hold of Truth as soon as we get in there. They won't fire at their leader."

John cautiously led the group to the door. When he got near, the door opened automatically and the squad rushed in. The Chief immediately saw the target in the middle of the room on a raised platform. He sprinted towards the Prophet, knocked him out of his floating throne, picked him up, and wrapped his arm around Truth's throat. The ODSTs followed the Chief shooting everything that moved. They had caught the commanding crew by surprise, and Brutes don't like surprises. The Brutes at the holopanel's jumped up and pulled out their plasma rifles. Chaos ensued as the Brutes shot in all directions, not knowing where they were taking fire from. The ODSTs took advantage of the confusion and took out as many Brutes as possible while John took care of the leftovers with Truth still in a headlock.

The Prophet of Truth struggled to free himself of John's grip, but the frail creature's struggle was all in vain. Staff Sergeant Shank walked up to the Master Chief with an ODST by his side. Jim searched the ODST's backpack and pulled out a syringe filled with a sedative. He injected it into the Prophet's long neck and the Prophet's struggling weakened. It took no more than a minute for the sedative to completely kick in and the Prophet went limp in the Chief's arm.

"Take him to the Pelicans, along with the others in the hall, and come right back here. Sergeant, go with them" Master Chief ordered.

"Yes, sir," the Sergeant took four other ODSTs and left while the other five remained in the bridge as security.

John clicked his radio on to check in with Lord Hood, "Admiral Hood, this is Spartan one-one-seven. The Prophet is in our custody and the bridge crew of the Forerunner ship has been eliminated."

"Good work, Spartan," Hood replied. The Admiral paused before he continued, "I just got an idea: do you think you can drive that thing, Chief?"

"I can try, sir," John had worked with Forerunner holopanel's before

and had gotten lucky. He wasn't sure if he could maneuver a space ship with unfamiliar runes and symbols, but he thought he'd give it a go anyways.

"See if you can get that thing to slow down and we'll send a few more boarding parties to wipe that ship clean of all Covenant. That ship will be an invaluable addition to our fleet once we learn how to control it."

"Aye, sir. Give me a few minutes to figure out the controls. And if all goes well, I should be able slow this thing down."

"Good. Reinforcements are en route, Master Chief. Hood out."

John looked around the bridge. It vaguely looked like the bridges of the few Covenant ships he had been on. But then again, this was a Forerunner ship, and all of the Covenant's technology was imitated after the Forerunners' technology. After all, the Covenant did worship the Forerunners as gods.

All of the control stations against the walls of the elliptical room. Unlike the Covenant ships, the raised platform in the middle had no control panels on it. The center platform must have been reserved for the commanding officer only. John wandered over to one of the control stations and looked it over. Something told him that he was looking at the wrong panel, and he moved on. He finally came to a panel that felt right and he perused the buttons. _This would be a hell of a lot easier with Cortana_, he thought. The Chief saw a purple vertical bar, touched his finger to the top and brought it down to the bottom. The ship rumbled as the engines reversed their thrust and the ship slowed down. John saw runes flashing on the panel and decreasing in number. He touched a symbol next to the purple bar when there were only a few runes left and the engines shut off. He had no idea why he picked the symbols he did, but for some reason they just felt like the right ones.

"Master Chief," Sergeant Shank's voice came over his radio, "We've got eight Pelicans inbound carrying two platoons of Marine reinforcements."

"Roger that," John replied. "Get that Prophet out of here and to the _Cairo_ defense station. Lord Hood will take the Prophet from there. I'm coming to the hangar to welcome the Marines."

9. ch 8: The Holy Crusaders

****Chapter 8: The Holy Crusaders****

_Ex-Covenant Cruiser _Radiant Essence_, vicinity of High Charity_
and Halo 05

8th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation (Covenant Holy Calendar)

1015 hours, October 27, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

Kado 'Toromee paced back and forth on the bridge of his newly captured cruiser, _Radiant Essence_. He rubbed the two nubs where his left mandibles used to be. It was a silly habit he developed whenever

he was nervous. He had sent out a Phantom transport to bring the Arbiter back to his ship and was impatiently awaiting his arrival. The Field Master hadn't heard from the Arbiter since they split up, but he had sent out the Phantom hoping that the Arbiter had taken care of the Jiralhanae Chieftain, Tartarus. He was tearing himself apart emotionally while he was waiting. He was sure the Arbiter was still alive, but on the other hand he didn't know what to do if the Arbiter had failed to kill Tartarus. All hope would be lost if the Arbiter failed, for he was the only one who would be able to stand a chance against the powerful Chieftain. 'Toromee pushed those thoughts to the back of his mind and hoped for the best.

"Master, incoming message from Phantom D-Six-Two, audio only," said the red-armored Sangheili at the Communications panel.

"Play it," 'Toromee ordered. He walked over the Comm. panel and leaned over the officer's shoulder.

"Kado, I have good news," the Arbiter's voice sounded through the speakers at the Comm. panel. "I'll explain more when I arrive. I'd prefer to speak with you personally."

"Message ended, Master," the Sangheili officer said.

"Master, Phantom D-Six-Two is on approach," announced the Sangheili stationed at the Operations panel. "It will arrive in one third of a unit."

"Very well," 'Toromee said. "Doru 'Forguemee, you are in charge until I get back. I'm going to greet the Arbiter myself."

'Forguemee stood up from his seat at the Comm. panel and gave 'Toromee a bow as he accepted the leadership position. When he sat down, the Field Master turned on his heels and walked out of the bridge.

'Toromee walked into the hangar as the Phantom was settling three meter above the floor. When the Phantom stopped moving, the Arbiter floated down the gravity lift from the rear of the Phantom and was followed by a recruit pushing an unconscious, gold-armored Sangheili on a floating gurney. When they got closer, 'Toromee recognized the Master with one arm laying on the gurney as one of his childhood comrades, Niko 'Gorlomee. Kado, Niko, and the Arbiter used to live in the same housing cluster when they were younger. The three of them had countless units of fun together as adolescents. But 'Toromee pushed the memories aside for now.

"Take him to the forward medical bay, he needs immediate attention," 'Toromee told the recruit. He turned to the Arbiter and put his right hand on the Arbiter's left shoulder, and the Arbiter returned the gesture. "It's good to see you again, Arbiter. I want to know everything that happened back there."

"Before I explain the story," the Arbiter started, "I must let you know that I have two Humans with me, and I do not bring them as prisoners. They helped me defeat Tartarus, and I would like them to stay unharmed."

"As you wish, Arbiter," 'Toromee agreed. He walked over to an intercom on the wall and activated it. "Crew of the Radiant

Essence_, there are two Humans onboard this ship. They are not prisoners, but I require that you do not touch them. More information will be given later, but for the time being the Humans must remain unharmed." He turned to the Arbiter, "You have much explaining to do."

"I will explain everything in due time. Come with me," the Arbiter said. They walked over to the Phantom and stood by the gravity lift. The Arbiter gave a shout, "You may come out now. Nobody will harm you on this vessel."

The two Sangheili watched as two Humans descended down the gravity lift and gracefully floated to the floor. They looked surprisingly calm for being on a ship full of creatures they had been at war with for the last twenty-seven stages. Perhaps the Covenant had underestimated the Humans' tenacity and courage.

"These are the Humans I told you about," the Arbiter said. "Let us go to the bridge. I will tell you more on the way."

The Arbiter and 'Toromee left the hangar with the Humans following. 'Toromee grabbed two blue-armored recruits and told them to follow behind the Humans. As they made their way to the bridge, the Arbiter told the Field Master all of the major events that transpired after 'Toromee had left to recapture the cruiser they were on now. He told him of the Human that commandeered the Scarab to blast the control room doors away. And how the same Human killed Tartarus's shield so the Arbiter could get in the finishing blows. The Arbiter also mentioned the female Human that grabbed the Sacred Icon and prevented the ring from firing. 'Toromee listened intently to the Arbiter's tale and couldn't help but wonder if they had chosen the wrong adversary to destroy. The Humans had proven to be very a resilient species. They had superior tactics when it came to ground battles, but the only reason the Covenant was winning the war was because the Humans' space technology was greatly inferior to theirs. When he thought about it, 'Toromee decided that the Humans could actually prove to be strong allies.

When they reached the bridge, the Arbiter paused just inside the door. It had only been ten cycles since he had last been on the bridge of a ship, but he was already nostalgic for the command of a ship.

"Go ahead, Arbiter," 'Toromee knew what the Arbiter wanted to do. "Give them a command."

The Arbiter walked up onto the raised platform in the middle of the bridge. The main bridge officers stood at their respective panels on the center platform and waited for the Arbiter to give a command.

"Navigations, make your heading two hundred sixty-three marks," the Arbiter's voice had a very commanding tone.

"Ship facing two-six-three marks, Arbiter," the navigations officer replied as the vessel rotated.

"Ship operations, set engines to three fourths power"

"Engines operating at three fourths, Arbiter," the ops officer tapped

the panel and the ship lurched forwards.

"Communications, establish a visual link with the entire fleet. I wish to give them all a message."

"Visual link established, Arbiter," 'Forguemee said. "Ready to record when you are."

"Start recording," the Arbiter ordered. "To all Sangheili Ship Masters: despite what the Prophets' propaganda says, your Arbiter still lives. The Prophets have betrayed us. I require a meeting of all the remaining Ship Masters to decide on our next move. All ships assemble at rally point Armor. The meeting of Ship Masters will be in the auxiliary hall on the flagship Perpetual Devotion in approximately two units. From this point forward I am assuming full command of this fleet. If anyone would like to challenge this motion, bring it up in the meeting. Until then, be forever strong and fear not pain, nor death. This has been the Arbiter."

"Message successfully sent, Arbiter," 'Forguemee announced.

"Very well," the Arbiter said. "Keep us on this heading. We should reach rally point Armor in a full unit."

The Arbiter walked into the auxiliary hall on the Perpetual Devotion and was met by one hundred eighty-two Ship Masters. The auxiliary hall was a large circular room in the middle section of the flagship. It could be used for anything, but was mainly used for large conferences. A large round table able to seat over two hundred Sangheili sat in the middle of the hall. The hall had the same eerie glow that reflected off the purple metal as all other Covenant structures.

The Arbiter walked to the table and offered seats to the two Humans and Kado 'Toromee. He looked at the Ship Masters before he sat down. Most of them were scowling at the presence of the Humans. Also, he realized that not all of them wore the golden armor of a Ship Master. He looked at all of the Sangheili that wore red armor made a mental note to himself that he should recommend them all for promotions if they survived. It took a great deal of courage and strength for a lesser officer to take up the Ship Master's position if there was no Ship Master. The Arbiter finally took his seat.

"We have several matters to discuss here," the Arbiter began. "First and foremost are these Humans with me. They helped me a great deal in the recent events."

The Arbiter went on to explain the same tale he told 'Toromee to the Ship Masters. The Masters listened intently and seemed to be devising ideas of their own about what to do with the Humans.

"Would you care to say anything?" the Arbiter asked the Humans when he finished his story.

"Yes, I would," the female Human stood up. "I am Commander Miranda Keyes of the United Nations Space Command. We have been fighting you for nearly thirty years, and I think now would be a prime time to form a truce. Since your Prophets have betrayed your species, we now

have a common enemy. Neither one of us can take on the Prophets' fleets alone, but if we worked together we could prevent the worst from happening. My species is currently on the verge of destruction, and yours isn't fairing much better. I would just like to put the matter of an alliance between our two races out on the table for discussion. Sergeant, do you have anything to add?"

"Why yes, I do, ma'am," the male Human also stood up. "I am Sergeant Major Avery J. Johnson of the United Nations Marine Corps. You couldn't have picked a worse enemy than the Human race! You may be basking in the glory of victory, but it's not over yet. The longer you fight us, the more we learn about you, and the better we are able to resist your attacks. Even though I would love to see every last one of you dead, I believe my Commander is right. We need to put our differences aside and help each other rid ourselves of the threat of the Prophets. It won't be easy, but just remember: your Prophets lied to you. They pulled you on this quest across the galaxy for who knows how long looking for something that's just gonna wind up killing you. Salvation, my ass!"

When the two Humans sat back down, a young red-armored Sangheili stood up.

"An alliance like this would be heresy, Arbiter," the young Ship Master protested. "I will never side with the Humans."

"Young Master, do you remember the Writ of Union?" the Arbiter asked.

"Of course, Arbiter"

"Then you know that part of the first canto states 'So let us cast arms aside and like discard our wrath.' We must do this with the Humans now if we want to survive this war."

The young Ship Master sat down without saying a word. A soft murmur came from the other Ship Masters as they talked with each other. The murmur stopped when one of them spoke up.

"We know that these Humans are willing to form an alliance," an older Ship Master said from his seat, "but how do we know that the rest of the Humans will agree to it. And we would also need to get the approval of the entire Sangheili race."

"We will get the rest of the Humans to agree," the Arbiter explained. "These two Humans—excuse me, the Commander and Sergeant Major are willing to be ambassadors for us. They have given their word that they will try their best to convince the Human leaders. As for the rest of our own race, I am not concerned about them at the moment. We must act quickly against the Prophets otherwise there will be no Humans to ally with. We do not have time to get approval from the Sangheili High Council."

"So what do you suppose we do against the Prophets, Arbiter?" the old Sangheili asked. "They control the Jiralhanae fleets. We wouldn't stand a chance if we went to the Humans' planet if we went with the fleet we have now."

"No, we would not," the Arbiter replied. "That is why we need to side with the Humans. Commander Keyes? Anything to add?"

"Earth, our planet, is defended by nearly three hundred orbital defense stations," Keyes said. "We also have a fleet of over two hundred ships. With the addition of your fleet, we would be unstoppable. The Prophets would get their so-called 'salvation' a little early. I suggest that we go to Earth as soon as possible. When we reach the Sol system, we will need to wait outside of the asteroid belt to avoid being misinterpreted as Covenant. From there I will need to contact my superiors to let them know that this fleet is not hostile. Once we take care of the Prophets' fleet, my superiors will most likely need to question you about this alliance. If all goes well, we will then be able to destroy the rest of the Brute fleets as a union."

"A sound plan, Commander," the Arbiter seemed to like her idea. "We will wage war, a war of rage, against the Prophets for their treachery. They will fall in the name of our gods. The ancient gods we used to worship before we formed the Covenant over four thousand stages ago. Our holy crusade against the Prophets will be forever known as our finest moment in all Sangheili history."

The Arbiter's speech got all of the Ship Masters riled up. They all stood when he finished and pumped their fists in the air as they let out growls of anger against the Prophets.

"The Covenant will fear the Holy Crusaders!" one of the younger Sangheili cheered.

"Excuse me, Arbiter," Commander Keyes tapped the Arbiter's shoulder. "May I make a request before we leave for Earth?"

"What is it?" the Arbiter replied.

"I recently received a message on my personal communicator from an Artificial Intelligence construct that belongs to us. Apparently it is stuck in the computer mainframe of your holy city. It contains very important and valuable information and we would like to retrieve it with your permission."

"Will this construct aid you in saving your planet?"

"Yes, the information it contains is vital to our survival."

"Then we will make a short stop at High Charity." The Arbiter turned to the Ship Masters, "Unless anyone else has anything to say, this meeting is over."

None of the Sangheili in the hall said anything. They all stood rigidly waiting for the Arbiter to dismiss them.

"Then get back to your ships. Be ready to make the jump to Earth in four units."

10. Ch 9: Preparing to Save Humanity

****Chapter 9: Preparing to Save Humanity****

Holy Crusader flagship _Perpetual Devotion_ on outbound vector from High Charity_

8th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation (Covenant Holy Calendar)

1120 hours, October 27, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

"While I was in High Charity's mainframe, I had access to data that was held in the Forerunner ship in the middle of the city," Cortana's slim figure stood on a small pedestal on the raised platform in the middle of the bridge of the former Covenant ship. "The Covenant may have had technology that was far superior to our own, but the Prophets were keeping a lot of better technology hidden from _you_," she spoke directly to the Arbiter. "There was technological data on that ship that would have made you unstoppable against Human weaponry. They must have been planning this whole thing for quite some time."

"Everything the Prophets told us have been lies," the Arbiter told the AI. "We are not the brainless body guards they thought us to be. They must have known that we would learn the truth. That must be why they were so eager to befriend the newly found Jiralhanae race. It would take them forever to learn the truth with brains the size of theirs."

"From my analysis, the Prophets seem to thrive on trickery and deception of others," Cortana continued. "But I digress from my point. I've taken the data from the Forerunner ship and have analyzed as much as I could. I've also added that data to the databanks on this ship. Is it possible to access the databanks on other ships from here?"

"Yes," replied the Arbiter, "you can establish a link to every vessel in our fleet from this ship."

"Good, this data has to be shared with every single ship," Cortana said. "From the data, I've found a way to travel through Slipspace at extreme speeds."

"Excuse me, construct," the Arbiter interrupted, "but what is Slipspace?"

"You must call it a different name," Cortana explained. "It is the alternate dimension used for interstellar travel. I've also slightly improved the data I've found. We need to reprogram the Slipspace generators on each ship with this new data. I have already done so on this ship. With it, we should be able to travel from here to Earth in a little over three hours when a normal Slipspace jump would take nearly two days."

"Excellent work, construct," the Arbiter was grateful for some good news finally. "The Huragok on the other vessels should be able to reprogram the generators quickly. We could be en route to your planet in no more than a unit, or fifteen of your minutes."

"Should I calculate a Slipspace vector for the fleet yet?" the AI asked.

"Go right ahead," the Arbiter said. "And make sure the fleet arrives in formation."

"Cortana," Commander Keyes stood nearby patiently listening, "we don't want to jump directly to Earth. We want to arrive in the Sol system just outside the asteroid belt to give me and Johnson a chance to contact the brass at HIGHCOM and make sure they don't fire on us."

"Yes ma'am," Cortana obliged. Her purple figure tinted to a dark blue and numbers and symbols scrolled up and down her body as she calculated the Slipspace jump for the entire fleet of nearly two hundred ships.

"Teru 'Barukomee," the Arbiter turned to the officer at the communications panel. "Record this message and send it to the fleet."

"Right away, Arbiter," 'Barukomee tapped at his controls. "Ready to record."

"Ship Masters of the Holy Crusaders, you are receiving new data that will make our journey through the alternate dimension significantly faster. Have your Huragok reprogram your generators with this new data as quickly as possible. Time is something we do not have much of. When the reprogramming is complete, send an acknowledgement signal to the Perpetual Devotion. When I have received everyone's signal, I will give the order to jump. The Human construct onboard this vessel will send each of you entry vectors and exit coordinates for the jump along with the special data. Await further orders when we arrive in the Human's star system. We will crush the opposition and make the Humans proud to fight alongside the Holy Crusaders. This has been the Arbiter."

"Message sent, Arbiter," said 'Barukomee. "Awaiting acknowledgement signals from the fleet."

"Very well." The Arbiter turned to Commander Keyes, "You may retire to your private quarters for now. I will summon you when I need you."

The Commander nodded and left the bridge. As soon as she went through the door, two Sangheili recruits standing by the door turned to escort her. The Arbiter had ordered the escorts to follow her everywhere for her own safety. He trusted that she would not harm any of his brethren, but it was his fellow Sangheili he did not trust.

Commander Keyes entered the small room that was her "private" quarters, which she shared with Sergeant Johnson. It's not that she didn't enjoy the Sergeant's company, but she would have liked to have a space to herself. She turned around and thanked her escorts who exited the room and stood on either side of the door. Johnson, who sat on a table across the room, stood up and walked to her.

"Well?" he asked.

"We are going to Earth as soon as we can," Keyes explained. "Cortana found something in High Charity that will make the Slipspace jump fifteen times faster, but we need to wait for the whole fleet to reprogram their Slipspace drives. The Arbiter said we should be able

to jump in about fifteen minutes, and it's been about ten since I left the bridge."

"Well, at least we have a chance to get there before the battle's over," Johnson said.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Cortana suddenly appeared in the middle of the table Johnson was previously sitting on. Her two-foot tall, purple figure almost matched the color of the walls. "We will be entering Slipspace shortly. We are waiting for about ten more ships to report back."

"Good, is everything all plotted out?" the Commander asked.

"Yes, we will arrive in the Sol system just outside of the asteroid belt as you asked, and we will also arrive in a tight formation," Cortana explained. "The journey will be slightly shorter than expected because of the formation I have plotted. The tighter our formation, the faster we will journey through Slipspace. Odd, I know, and I haven't quite figured out the reasoning for this peculiar property."

"Excellent work, Cortana," Keyes said. "Johnson and I are ready."

Suddenly there was a slight rumble throughout the ship. At the same time Keyes felt vaguely nauseous for a moment.

"We have just entered Slipspace," Cortana announced.

"I noticed," Keyes replied.

"If you don't mind me asking, ma'am, could you give me some more details about this whole situation?" Cortana inquired. "Your explanation when you picked me up on High Charity was rather vague. And since we have plenty of time before we get to Earth I thought I might learn a little more about this new 'alliance.'"

"Of course, Cortana," Keyes walked over to the table and eyed the large, oddly shaped chair meant for an Elite. She opted to sit on a nearby stool, which looked more comfortable. She then began to tell Cortana everything that had happened since she left for Halo's control room with Tartarus.

While the Commander told her story, Johnson strolled over to one of the large beds and lay down. He hated being on spaceships, much less while they were in Slipspace. He wanted to have solid ground beneath his feet not some strange purple metal with fake gravity. He had more freedom on the ground without the tight winding passages on a ship. So with nothing to do for the next three hours, Sergeant Johnson slept and dreamt about being back on Earth kicking the crap out of a bunch of Covenant bastards who dared to touch his beloved homeland.

"We have entered the alternate dimension, Arbiter," announced the young Sangheili officer at the ops panel.

"Very well," said the Arbiter. "'Barukomee, get me the _Radiant

Essence_ on a visual link."

"Right away," the red-armored Sangheili tapped a few controls and the face of a golden Ship Master appeared on one of the viewscreens that was formerly dominated by the complete blackness of the empty dimension used for quick interstellar travel.

"You called, Arbiter?" the Ship Master said cheerfully.

"It's good to see you up and well, Niko," the Arbiter smiled. He noticed that 'Gorlomee had a mechanical arm in place of the one that had been blown off by Tartarus. The metallic skeleton attached to his shoulder matched the hue of walls on the bridge on the screen. "How are you adjusting to your new arm?"

"It feels just like my own," 'Gorlomee raised his mechanical left arm and scratched the back of his neck with ease. "It is amazing what our medical team can do with such critical wound."

"Are you enjoying your new command?" asked the Arbiter.

"Quite so," replied 'Gorlomee. "It is much bigger and more powerful than the measly little frigate that was my previous command. You have my gratitude Arbiter."

"You deserve that vessel, Niko," the Arbiter bowed slightly then chuckled. "I hope you take better care of it than that toy Banshee I gave to you when we were only nine stages old."

'Gorlomee laughed at the memory, "That was not my fault. Kado was the one who flew it into the tree."

The Arbiter just continued to chuckle at Niko's response.

"But I will take good care of this gift," 'Gorlomee continued. "It is much more valuable."

"Good. Now go make sure your vessel is battle ready," the Arbiter said. "We must be ready to expect anything when we enter the Humans' system."

"As you wish, Arbiter," the Ship Master bowed and the viewscreen returned to the black void.

"Duku 'Zerrazee," the Arbiter turned to a golden-armored Sangheili standing at the rear of the bridge. "I give you my command while I am gone. Call me when we get close to the Sol system. I am going to my quarters for some much needed rest."

The former Master of the _Perpetual Devotion_ bowed and took the Arbiter's place on the control platform as the Arbiter walked out of the bridge.

11. Ch 10: The Brink of Annihilation

Chapter 10: The Brink of Annihilation

_UNSC Cruiser _Talon_ in the vicinity of Earth_

8th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation (Covenant Holy Calendar)

1200 hours, October 27, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

Commodore Frank Schmidt sat in his command chair aboard the _Talon_. The massive warship had been recently refit with some of the best technology the UNSC could offer. The Marathon-class cruiser had fifty Inferno missile pods with twenty missiles each. The Inferno missiles were an improvement upon the now outdated Archer missiles. They were faster, more agile, and more devastating than their predecessors. Each Inferno missile was essentially a ten kiloton nuke. The small yield meant that the EMP would be less intense and would not travel very far, so the Infernos could be fired from the same distance that Archers usually were. Unfortunately, the Inferno missiles were very expensive so very few ships received them. The _Talon_ was one of those lucky ships.

The Cruiser also boasted two Magnetic Accelerator Cannons. One was refit like the _Pillar of Autumn_'s to fire three light rounds in rapid succession that would break apart on impact sending shrapnel through an enemy ship at incredible speeds. The second MAC fired a single heavy round capable of passing through a five kilometer long Covenant assault carrier lengthwise.

In addition to the main weapons, the Cruiser carried a squadron of Longsword interceptors, five Shiva nuclear warheads each with a hundred megaton yield, a large number of fifty caliber point defense guns, and an unprecedented two and a half meters of Titanium-A battle plate.

Even with all that firepower, Commodore Schmidt was still nervous. This was because fifteen minutes ago the Covenant arrived at Earth with a fleet of over two hundred fifty warships. And to make things worse, they had brought this new ship unlike anything the Humans had ever seen, and it was taking out their ships left and right as if they were mosquitoes.

The Commodore and his flotilla of twenty frigates and destroyers had taken out about ten ships without losing any of their own since the Covenant arrived. By Human standards that was good progress. But still, the Covenant fleet hadn't dropped below two hundred in numbers, and the Humans had lost nearly a hundred ships and defense stations. Schmidt watched the center viewscreen nervously as the strange triangular ship the Covenant brought with them turned toward his flotilla.

"All ships, evasive maneuvers!" he yelled. A camera nearby constantly recorded him so all the ships under his command could see and hear him at all times.

The one-star Admiral braced himself in his chair as the _Talon_ veered sharply to the left. Suddenly, a bright purple beam of light erupted from the strange ship and struck the frigate _Barracuda_ to the right of the _Talon_. Parts of the _Barracuda_ exploded as the beam passed through several Archer pods and the armory. Muffled pings were heard as shrapnel from the frigate bounced off the _Talon_'s battle plate.

Schmidt would have ordered his flotilla to regroup and counter but he

had received orders directly from Fleet Admiral Hood not to engage that ship. However, there was no need to attack the ship because it did not fire a second time. It just floated as if it was dead. Something odd was going on.

"All ships regroup in delta formation bearing two-eight-five degrees and zero degrees inclination. All engines at one-zero-zero percent," Schmidt ordered. Viewscreens all around the bridge showed all sides surrounding the cruiser, and the Commodore watched his flotilla form a triangle with his ship in the lead. They were heading straight for a Covenant battle group and flanking it.

"_Eagle_, _Atlantis_, and _Weatherill_ concentrate on the destroyer. Everyone else: pick your targets and fire at will," the Commodore hid his anxiousness well while giving commands. He turned to his own crew, "Lieutenant Rhodes, arm Inferno pods A through E and both MACs. Franklin, calculate a firing solution with the missiles and light rounds on the nearest frigate and the heavy round on the one just right of the first."

"Solution calculated, sir," Franklin appeared on a pedestal next to the command chair. His blue figure was that of a scientist with jacket and glasses. He, like Cortana, was a "Smart" AI. There was no limit to his learning abilities.

"Infernos armed, and MACs are at seventy-five percent, sir," Lieutenant Derek Rhodes announced.

"Good, fire on my mark," Schmidt said calmly. He turned to the camera, "Stay in formation until the enemy is engaged. If the group is not eliminated after the first salvo, break off from the formation."

"Covenant ships at thirty thousand kilometers and closing, sir," Lieutenant Tao Zheng said from the navigations console.

"Fire Infernos, Lieutenant Rhodes," the Commodore ordered.

"Infernos away," Rhodes announced.

Plumes of exhaust streaked across the blackness of space from every ship in the flotilla. Thousands of missiles, Archers and Infernos, targeted the eight Covenant ships.

"MACs at full charge," Rhodes said.

"Fire MACs," Schmidt ordered.

"MACs firing," came the reply from the weapons station.

The entire ship shuddered as the cannons fired. Four white-hot slugs of molten metal flew from the ship at an incredible speed along with several others from the rest of the flotilla. Motes of red light started to collect along the lateral lines of the Covenant ships.

"Sir, the Covenant ships are charging their plasma turrets," Lieutenant Junior Grade Justin Braxton anxiously said from the ops station.

The MAC rounds overtook the missiles and splashed against the shields of the Covenant ships. The shield on the first frigate absorbed the first two rounds but they flickered bright silver and disappeared as the third round went through the ship leaving a two meter wide hole all the way through the ship from the port to starboard side. The Covenant launched their salvo of Plasma torpedoes at the UNSC ships. Ten blazing red balls of energy traversed the empty space between the two forces. The heavy round from the _Talon_ struck the second frigate and passed right through the center. The ship exploded as the MAC round hit the ship's reactor. Seconds later, balls of fire blossomed from the side of the first frigate as the Infernos exploded. If the explosions didn't disable the ship, the EMPs surely would.

The other ships in the Covenant battle group were hit as well. The destroyer took three MAC rounds in the side before its shield died, but blue flashes from pulse lasers erupted from the side of the destroyer and nearly half of the Archer missiles exploded before they were even close to the ship. The other half made it and detonated along the side, but it wasn't enough to do sufficient damage to the ship. On the other hand, two other frigates exploded and the three remaining frigates were damaged. At the extreme speeds that the ships were moving it was hard to aim the unguided MAC rounds. Many missed their intended targets and the defensive pulse lasers destroyed many of the Archer missiles. The Humans couldn't afford to have poor accuracy, especially when the fate of Earth was at stake.

"Plasma torpedo impact in twenty seconds, sir," Lieutenant Braxton announced.

"All ships, break off and do what you can against the remaining targets," Commodore Schmidt ordered to the flotilla. The ships on either side of the _Talon_ veered off in every direction possible. Schmidt turned to his own crew, "Lieutenant Zheng, set heading to three-three-zero degrees."

"New heading: three-three-zero degrees, sir," Zheng furiously tapped his controls.

"Lieutenant Braxton, engines at one hundred ten percent."

"Engines at one-one-zero percent, sir," Lieutenant Braxton's hands floated fluidly over his control panel. "Reactor red line in ten minutes."

The huge warship abruptly turned to the right. It passed under another ship barely missing it by ten meters. On the viewscreens multiple plasma torpedoes hit three frigates and a destroyer. The small frigates stood no chance against the destructive power of the plasma torpedoes, especially if it was more than one torpedo, but the destroyer, though heavily damaged, was still operational. One of the other destroyers in the Commodore's flotilla attempted the Keyes Loop. It flew straight into a pair of torpedoes and used its emergency thrusters to jump to the left at the last second. The pair of red blobs arced around to follow the destroyer, which was now on a collision course with a Covenant frigate. The UNSC destroyer skimmed over the top of the frigate and in so doing took out the shield of the smaller ship. The plasma torpedoes, being less agile than the Human destroyer splashed along the side of the frigate and slowly melted the ship away. Suddenly a plasma torpedo slammed into the

side of the _Talon_.

"Torpedo impact on decks three through six, port side, aft section," Lieutenant Braxton wiped the sweat from his forehead. "It's burning through the armor plating, sir."

"Evacuate all compartments with imminent hull breach and vent the atmosphere," Schmidt tried to look as calm as possible to keep the bridge crew in line.

"Venting atmosphere. Hull breach on deck four," Braxton had troubles keeping his hands steady as he type his commands. "Hull breach has been contained on decks four and five. Hull temperature cooling."

"Lieutenant Rhodes, arm MACs and Inferno pods F through J," the Commodore settled down a little when the plasma stopped burning through his armor, but it wasn't over yet.

"Infernos ready and MACs are charged," Rhodes seemed to be suffering from the same anxiety as the rest of the crew and his hands shook as he armed the weapons.

"Lieutenant Zheng, turn this ship around," Schmidt said,

"Aye sir, new heading one-five-zero degrees," Zheng nervously typed in the command. The _Talon_ rotated a hundred eighty degrees and the engines roared as the shipped slowed to a stop and accelerated in the opposite direction.

"Franklin, let's target the destroyer this time," Schmidt suggested.

"Yes sir. Firing solution calculated," Franklin said with a slight nod.

"Rhodes, fire at will," Schmidt ordered.

"Infernos away, sir," Rhodes said with a smirk. That kind of firepower should take out that destroyer. "MACs firing in eight seconds."

The crew watched as the missiles flew towards the destroyer. They noticed that other UNSC ships had fired at the three remaining Covenant ships. The _Talon_ shuddered again as the MACs fired. Four white bolts streaked across the space at one tenth the speed of light. The Covenant destroyer took the three light rounds before its shield flickered and died. But pinpoints of red light started to collect along the side of the destroyer as its three plasma turrets charged. The heavy round then struck the stern and left a gaping hole in the ship. The impact sent the ship into a slow spin, which allowed the Inferno missiles to cover a larger area along the ship. Blots of fire appeared as the Infernos exploded along the side. The purple armor of the Covenant ship was blasted away and the inner decks could be seen. Orange fires blazed throughout the vessel and white mist plumed out into space as corridors and compartments explosively decompressed. Despite the carnage, the Covenant ship managed to launch two plasma torpedoes at the UNSC cruiser before two more MAC rounds and several hundred Archer missiles from other UNSC ships finally disabled the massive Covenant destroyer. The structure of the

ship had been weakened so much that even the slow spin was tearing it apart. The bridge crew cheered as the alien ship was ripped apart and the remaining Covenant frigates in the battle group were dispatched.

"Sir, plasma torpedo impact in thirty seconds," Lieutenant Braxton shouted over the cheering. The bridge was suddenly silent.

On the starboard viewscreen, the UNSC frigate Weatherill flew past in the opposite direction and intercepted the torpedoes taking both in the side. The frigate was already beyond repair and the crew sacrificed themselves to save a much more valuable ship. The small ship floated dead in space as the plasma ate through its meter of armor plating like a blowtorch through butter.

"Lieutenant Braxton, did any lifeboats launch from the Weatherill?" Commodore Schmidt asked.

"A few, sir. Only enough to hold the marines and ODSs on board," Lieutenant Braxton turned to face the Commodore with a grave look on his face.

The Commodore took a deep breath, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and stood up. He took a minute and watched the viewscreens around him. He surveyed the battlefield around Earth. Red blobs of plasma floated everywhere, white-hot bolts streaked from ship to ship as MAC rounds were fired, and dead hulks of ships littered the battlefield. Occasionally a large explosion could be seen as a nuclear warhead exploded. But the strange triangular ship the Commodore saw earlier was nowhere in sight anymore.

"All ships beta formation bearing one-six-eight degrees and zero-zero-five degrees inclination, all engines at zero-eight-zero percent," Schmidt sat back down and took a look at his own bridge crew. They slumped back in their chairs breathing heavily. That battle was too close. If it weren't for the sacrifice of the Weatherill they would be in big trouble.

"New heading is one-six-eight degrees, sir," Zheng said with more stability in his voice.

"Engines at zero-eight-zero percent, sir. Reactor is cooling," Lieutenant Braxton regained control over his trembling hands.

The remaining fifteen ships in the flotilla formed a vertical diamond around the Talon. The group flew slightly upwards in hopes of catching another battle group by surprise by attacking from above.

"Franklin, estimate Human and Covenant casualties," the one-star Admiral knew he wouldn't like the answer but he had to know. "And put them on my data pad." He suddenly thought of the morale of his crew.

"Right away, sir," Franklin said and disappeared into his pedestal.

Figures appeared on Frank Schmidt's personal data pad. An estimated seventy-five Human ships remained out of the fleet of two hundred ten and approximately half of the three hundred original Super MAC

defense stations remained. The Covenant fleet still had nearly one hundred fifty ships. The UNSC had lost over two hundred fifty ships compared to the Covenant losses of only one hundred. This is why the UNSC had to outnumber the Covenant three to one in previous battles, and most of those battles were still losses. Now the Humans faced odds that were slowly changing against them.

Schmidt read a little further and found that the UNSC had another eighty ships en route from the Inner Colonies that would arrive sometime within the next half hour. Unfortunately, the battle might not last another half hour because he just read that the Covenant had made landfall near Alaska and northern Canada. That was where the power generators for half the orbital defense stations were. If the Covenant took those out, the UNSC wouldn't stand a chance.

Several minutes later, Commodore Schmidt's flotilla met up with another Covenant battle group of an assault carrier, three destroyers, and three frigates. Even though this group was more powerful than the last, the UNSC had the element of surprise by dropping down on top of them.

"Sir, we will be directly over the enemy ships in sixty seconds," Lieutenant Zheng said from the navigations console.

"All ships change course to zero-eight-two degrees declination. Stay in formation beta until we engage the enemy," the Commodore said to the camera. He watched the group rotate as a whole and accelerate downwards towards the enemy ships.

"Course changed to zero-eight-two degrees declination," Zheng replied.

"All frigates target the carrier, all destroyers fire at will," Schmidt hoped the Covenant wouldn't notice them until it's too late. He didn't want the carrier to launch its Seraph fighters. To make sure, he would target the carrier also.

"Arm MACs, Lieutenant Rhodes," Schmidt ordered.

"MAC guns are hot sir," Rhodes said.

"Franklin, target that carrier."

"Calculated, sir," Franklin appeared on the pedestal again.

"Frigates fire on my mark," Schmidt ordered into the camera.

"Covenant ships at twenty thousand kilometers and closing, sir," Zheng announced.

"Fire!" Schmidt yelled.

Over a dozen MAC rounds streaked towards the massive carrier and several others targeted the destroyers. Plumes of exhaust followed as over five hundred Archer missiles trailed behind. The MAC rounds hit. The carrier's shield absorbed five rounds from the frigates, but the Talon's rounds and several others went through. The top of the five kilometer long carrier was riddled with holes ranging from two to

five meters wide. The Archers impacted several seconds later and the entire dorsal structure of the carrier was engulfed in flames. When the fire and smoke cleared, Schmidt saw that the huge carrier was rotating and its lateral lines were collecting plasma.

"Damn it, how is that thing still alive," Schmidt cursed. "All ships break formation!"

"Sir, we have additional smaller contacts," Lieutenant Zheng said. "They've launched their Seraphs!"

"Lieutenant Rhodes, arm one of our Shiva warheads, and set it to remote fuse. Lieutenant Zheng, change course to one-three-six degrees and zero-one-five degrees declination," Schmidt had a plan to take out that carrier.

"Shiva is armed, sir," Rhodes replied with a smirk. He knew what the Commodore was thinking.

"New course is one-three-six degrees and zero-one-five degrees declination, sir" Zheng said as the ship rotated and leveled.

"All ships get to minimum safe distance for Shiva warhead. Target is the carrier," the Commodore said to the camera. He turned to Lieutenant Rhodes, "Set the Shiva for maximum burn for thirty seconds directly behind us, and fire the warhead."

"Shiva is away, sir," Rhodes said anxiously.

"Lieutenant Zheng, let me know when we are two hundred thousand kilometers away," Commodore Schmidt said.

"Aye sir. Approaching one hundred thousand kilometer distance," Zheng replied.

Every ship in the flotilla scattered in every direction. But as they did so, the Covenant launched a salvo of plasma torpedoes. The torpedoes accelerated towards the fleeing UNSC forces and caught two already crippled frigates in the engines, which subsequently exploded.

"Passing two hundred thousand kilometer mark, sir," Zheng announced.

Schmidt spun around in his seat and watched the rear viewscreen. The carrier was a fraction of the size it was earlier.

"Detonate the Shiva!" Schmidt commanded.

A huge ball of flame swallowed the carrier and several ships nearby as the one hundred megaton nuke exploded. The blobs of plasma following the Human ships dissipated as the EMP disrupted the magnetic charge holding the plasma together. Another UNSC frigate was caught in the EMP and its entire electrical system went dead. The explosion lasted nearly thirty seconds, but when it cleared, the carrier and two destroyers that were nearby were gone. The ships were completely evaporated by the blast. The remaining ships had caught the EMP and were now floating dead in space.

The Commodore surveyed the battlefield again looking for another

Covenant battle group to engage, but it looked like the Covenant were retreating. Every Covenant ship he could see was accelerating out of the system. White lights appeared off the bows of each ship as they jumped into Slipspace.

"Sir, we are receiving a priority Alpha transmission from the _Cairo_ defense platform," Lieutenant Maria Ramirez said from the communications console.

"Put it on the main viewscreen," the Commodore stood up and walked towards the viewscreen.

The face of Fleet Admiral Sir Terrence Hood appeared on the screen. The man of sixty-five held himself with a certain dignity and pride not seen with many other UNSC personnel. From his confidence (and grey hair) one could tell this man had seen countless battles in his lifetime. Commodore Schmidt sharply saluted him.

"As you were son," despite his name, Lord Hood spoke without any accent. "Get your flotilla to rendezvous point Foxtrot, Commodore. We need to regroup the fleet. This battle isn't over yet."

"Aye aye, sir," the Schmidt replied as Admiral Hood's face disappeared. He turned to the camera linking him to his flotilla, "All ships make best speed for rendezvous point Foxtrot."

The _Talon_ turned around and the engines rumbled as the ship accelerated toward Earth. Schmidt looked at the clock on his data pad: 1253 hours. The battle had lasted more than an entire hour and Schmidt had a feeling that they hadn't even seen the worst of it yet.

12. Ch 11: The Eye of the Storm

****Chapter 11: The Eye of the Storm****

30 kilometers Northwest of Power Facility Bravo, 69.5° North, 154° West, Alaska, Earth

8th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation (Covenant Holy Calendar)

1240 hours, October 27, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

Senior Chief Petty Officer Frederic-104 watched the Covenant unload their troops from his hilltop perch. They prepared for an assault on the power generators that kept the Super MAC orbital defense stations online. Suddenly Fred was reminded of his struggle on Reach. This time, the Spartans would not fail.

Nearly an hour ago, Fred and his team received word that they were being transferred to the largest power facility, Bravo, in northern Alaska. That meant one thing: the Covenant had begun a full-scale assault on Earth and they wanted the Spartans to protect the power stations if the Covenant decided to pull what they did on Reach.

When Fred had arrived, he saw scores of Phantoms descending into the atmosphere. Immediately, he and his team set out to survey the

Covenant LZ. The Spartans were not defensive soldiers and decided to take the Covenant by surprise as they marched to the facility.

"Alan, is there anything beyond that ridge?" Fred asked. Alan-017 and two others were on a short ridge across the Covenant LZ from Fred. The region that the power facility was built was rather mountainous. This gave the Spartans a huge advantage: they could fire down from tall hills and cliffs upon the Covenant as they maneuvered through the winding valleys and passages.

"It's all clear. Everything seems to be in this confined area, sir," Alan reply via helmet radio.

"There's only one way they can get to facility Bravo from here, and it's through a valley. We'll set up an ambush there," Fred said to his team. "Everyone return to my position and I'll explain what I've got in mind."

Five acknowledgement lights winked on Fred's heads up display. It wasn't long before Alan and the rest of the team met up with Fred.

"The Covenant has brought Wraiths with them, so that means that they have to go through the valley and they'll be moving slowly," Fred explained. "We can set up our Lotus anti-tank mines there. The Southwest wall of the valley is taller than the other, so Linda and Nick can snipe from the taller cliff, and Alan, Will, Jo, and I will take them out from the lower cliff. From there, we gotta improvise. Let's move out."

Linda-058, Nicholas-065, William-043, Joanna-130, and Alan fell in line behind Fred as jogged down the hillside away from the Covenant. They entered the valley Fred spoke of and took off the mines strapped to their backs. They set the mines up in a line down the length of the valley. Fifty meters between each mine ensured that the explosion from one wouldn't cause the next to explode. The Spartans quickly scrambled up the near vertical cliff faces. Linda and Nick climbed the eighty meter precipice in twelve seconds flat by punching their own hand and foot holds into rock face. They set themselves up near the end of the valley. Luckily the tops of both sides of the valley were lightly forested so the Spartans could hide in the trees and shoot down into the open gorge below.

"Jo and Alan, take up positions near the second and fourth mines respectively and ready your Jackhammers," Fred ordered. Joanna and Alan jogged away through the trees. "Will, set up the thirty-caliber turret near the fifth mine, but don't open fire until the Covenant passes Alan's position. I'll hunker down in the trees by the third mine and do what I can."

Fred ran off to his position and watched the entrance of the valley anxiously.

"Is everyone in position?" Fred asked over the radio. He received five acknowledgement lights a split second later.

Finally the Covenant entered the valley. Several rows of Jackals marched ten across along the eight meter wide valley floor carrying their energy shields at their sides. Every fifth row a pair of Brutes

marched on either side of the Jackals as if herding them along. Fifty meters into the valley, the first Lotus mine exploded. The first ten rows of Jackals and Brutes flew into the air flailing their appendages as they hit the walls of the valley. Now, not only did the Covenant have to march through the crater from the mine, but they also had to march over the dead bodies of those caught in the explosion. That would slow them down considerably. Even still, the Covenant marched on as if nothing had happened. It was only after Linda and Nick opened fire that the Covenant realized that this was an ambush rather than just a minefield.

Two white streaks appeared from the far end of the valley and Fred watched two Brutes slump over. A rocket from Joanna's position landed in the middle of the Jackals sending the little creatures headlong into the opposite cliff face. The Jackals immediately hid behind the safety of their energy shields and frantically fired at where they thought they were being shot from, but the Spartans had already vanished into the trees. Bolts of plasma charred the trees along the cliffs and melted the rock.

Fred wondered why there were no Grunts or Elites. Usually they would be at the forefront of any battalion, but Fred hadn't seen a single one.

The Covenant kept marching and the second Lotus exploded. It had the same effect as the first but was enhanced by another rocket from Jo's Jackhammer. Two more white streaks came from Linda and Nick's position and two more Brutes fell. Then Fred saw what he hoped not to see: Drones. A large force of Drones came fluttering through the valley at the height of the lower cliff. As they flew past they fired their plasma pistols into the trees. Fred opened fire with his fully automatic MA5B assault rifle, and the Drones dropped like the huge flies they were. But the horde of Drones just kept coming.

"Will, help me with these Drones!" Fred shouted over the radio.

Fred heard the rattle of the thirty-caliber machine gun turret as Will opened fire. The Drones fell out of the sky by the dozens and littered the valley floor. Carefully concealed in the trees, the Spartans were left unscathed as they finished off what seemed to be several hundred Drones. Meanwhile, Linda, Nick, Jo, and Alan continued to whittle away at the ground forces.

Despite being fired upon by forces they couldn't see, the Covenant still marched through the valley. Row upon row of Jackals entered the valley but did not exit. Molten rock rained down into the valley as plasma splashed along the cliff faces. Explosions from Jackhammer rockets cost the Covenant dozens of lives each. The Covenant had made it past the third and fourth mines when Fred finally saw the cavalry and artillery. Ghosts hovered into the valley two abreast. Three rows entered then came a single Wraith mortar tank. The pattern continued for about five repetitions, and then more Jackals and Brutes on foot followed.

"Take out the Ghosts and let the first Wraith hit one of the mines!" Fred yelled.

Two rockets sped towards the first six Ghosts. The rockets exploded between the first four. The explosions of the rockets caused the Ghosts themselves to explode. Two more streaks from the snipers

appeared and the following two Ghosts halted in their tracks as the Brute drivers were incapacitated. The Wraith continued over the Ghosts. Suddenly the Wraith fired at the shorter cliff to the Northeast. The large blue ball of plasma lazily arced toward Will's position. Because of the immobile turret, Will was the most vulnerable and visible. He left the turret and scrambled into the woods when he saw the plasma coming at him. The plasma smashed into a cluster of trees, which instantly ignited.

"Fred, the turret is lost!" Will exclaimed.

"Right. Everybody fall back! Everyone meet at the rendezvous point!" Fred shouted. He saw two more rockets explode in another group of Ghost before he left. As he ran through the woods near the cliff edge, he saw the first Wraith tank explode as it passed over one of the Lotus anti-tank mines.

He continued running at a decent twenty kilometers per hour for several minutes until he came to a small clearing. Will and Alan were already there and Nick, Linda, and Jo arrived soon after.

"Let's get back to Bravo facility. We can handle the rest from there," Fred said. The Spartans jogged back through the hills and woods back to power facility Bravo. Along with Master Chief Petty Officer John-117, these were the last of the Spartan II's. The other twenty-six were either MIA or KIA, but they were all listed as MIA to give the impression that the Spartans were invincible.

_UNSC orbital defense station _Cairo_, in geosync orbit around Earth_

8th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation (Covenant Holy Calendar)

1325 hours, October 27, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

Fleet Admiral Sir Terrence Hood, or Lord Hood as he was more colloquially known, stood looking out the large window on the bridge of the _Cairo_. The _Cairo_ was one of the orbital defense platforms around Earth. The defense platforms had been nicknamed Super MACs because of their size. Each platform was essentially a giant Magnetic Accelerator Cannons with a dock, a hangar, a barracks, and a bridge. Like the platforms that used to orbit Reach, these cannons could hurl a three thousand ton projectile at four tenths of the speed of light. It didn't take much to eliminate a Covenant ship with those guns, especially when each cluster of three platforms targeted the same ship. At one point, there were three hundred of these Super MAC defense stations orbiting Earth, but since the Covenant had arrived that number had dwindled to less than one hundred fifty.

"Sir, we've received word from power stations Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, and Echo," a young female Lieutenant said from the communications station. "They have eliminated all Covenant forces. Unfortunately, power station Delta is out of contact."

Admiral Hood didn't move his gaze from the window. After several moments he turned and walked to the communications console, "How many

platforms does that leave us with, Lieutenant Owen?"

"One hundred eighteen," Lieutenant Sara Owen answered. "Delta station provided power for nineteen platforms. It was relatively small."

"We can't afford to lose any more of the orbitals," Lord Hood took his cap off and scratched his head. "Have our reinforcements arrived?"

"Yes, forty-five ships from Alpha Centauri arrived ten minutes ago and another thirty-seven from other colonies have been arriving scattered in these last minutes," Lieutenant Owen replied.

"Good," Lord Hood said as he put his cap back on, "Get me a link with General Bradford on priority Alpha."

"Aye, sir," Owen quickly typed a few things and one of the viewscreens on the bridge lit up. General of the Army Henry Bradford's face occupied the center. He was roughly the same age as Admiral Hood. His face was thin and he had jet-black hair that was balding on top.

"General, is there any way to recapture power facility Delta from the Covenant?" Hood asked.

"Facility Delta has been completely destroyed, Terrence," Bradford replied.

"Have you sent out any scouting parties?"

"Of course I have, but none of them reported back."

"Send in an attack force then."

"Are you out of your mind? That would be suicide! And besides, we just got GPS images back that show a smoldering crater where power facility Delta used to be."

Admiral Hood didn't like what he was hearing. He buried his face in his hand for a second to think.

"There's nothing more we can do, Terrence. Delta station is lost," the General of the Army didn't like that a Fleet Admiral was trying to tell him what to do. They may have both been of the five-star rank in their respective branches, but Bradford believed that Hood should stay away from ground conflicts and let the Army handle those.

"Well, I guess our options are running low then," Hood said with a sigh.

"Indeed. I am sending additional troops to the remaining power stations in case the Covenant comes back for a second try. And unless you have anything else to bother me about, I have to get back to work here," Bradford had a hint of irritation in his voice.

"I have nothing more, Henry. Hood out," Lord Hood said. With that, General Bradford's face disappeared. Hood patted Lieutenant Owen, who was watching nervously, on the shoulder. The Admiral walked back to the large window on the bridge that looked out to the massive cannon

and rested his chin in his hand. He took in the view with part of the Earth in the distance and tried to clear his mind. After several minutes Lieutenant Owen spoke up again.

"Admiral, sir, there's an incoming message from the Solaris remote sensor outpost," she announced. When Admiral Hood didn't turn around, Lieutenant Owen continued, "It says that a very large mass suspected to be the Covenant fleet again was just seen traveling towards us through Slipspace. It is expected to arrive in less than a minute, sir."

"So be it," Lord Hood muttered under his breath. Without turning the Admiral told her, "Set this station to combat alert Alpha. All hands to battle stations."

"Aye sir," Lieutenant Owen typed in the command and a siren sounded throughout the station.

Hood finally turned from the window and walked to the large tactical display board at the other end of the bridge. The board displayed the Earth and its moon in the center and the positions of every ship in the Human fleet. Suddenly, hundreds of red dots appeared in the top right corner of the tactical display.

"Sir, multiple Slipspace ruptures at one point five million kilometers from Earth near the forty-five degree mark," one of the male Lieutenants nearby said.

"Estimated number of ships?" Lord Hood asked.

"Nearly three hundred, sir. More than the first attack," the Lieutenant replied.

"Damn," Hood whispered. "Lieutenant Owen, send a message to the Preston Cole saying that it is to join up with the rest of the fleet."

"Aye, sir!" Owen said with a large grin as she typed out the message.

"Let's give those Covenant bastards a little surprise," Admiral Hood said.

The Preston Cole was named after the legendary Vice Admiral. The brilliant tactician led the first of an unfortunate few major successful assaults on the Covenant during the fall of the Outer Colonies twenty years ago. During his four year long campaign, Vice Admiral Cole and his fleet tried desperately to defend the Outer Colonies after the original assault, but were constantly hammered and outgunned by the technologically superior forces. Cole ultimately perished while defending a colony with a dangerously small and war weary fleet. Vice Admiral Preston Cole was labeled a war hero after his unfortunate death and to Lord Hood it seemed an honorable motion to name their secret weapon after him. This ship could finally turn the tide of the war.

Fleet Admiral Hood went back to the large window at the back of the bridge. He could see the UNSC fleet waiting to engage a Covenant fleet twice its size. From behind the massive MAC a beige triangular ship appeared and moved to join the UNSC fleet: the Preston

Cole_.

13. Ch 12: An Awkward Alliance

Chapter 12: An Awkward Alliance

_UNSC orbital defense station _Cairo_, in geosync orbit around Earth_

8th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation (Covenant Holy Calendar)

1410 hours, October 27, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

"Admiral, a Covenant cruiser is preparing to fire on us!" a dark haired male Lieutenant said from the targeting console of the _Cairo_ defense station.

"Lieutenant Lockhardt, rotate platform and target that ship," Fleet Admiral Hood said as he sat in his command chair.

"Aye sir, rotating platform," Lockhardt punched in a few commands. The crew held on as the station quickly rotated. "Cruiser is targeted, but out of range."

"Ensign Kotchevski, be ready to fire on my mark," Lord Hood said. Several long seconds ticked by as the main viewscreen showed the Covenant cruiser drifting towards the station. Red motes of light could be seen collecting on the ship as it charged its weapons.

"Target is in range!" Lockhardt announced.

"Fire!" Hood yelled.

"Firing main cannon," Kotchevski obliged.

The lights on the bridge dimmed and a loud thump was heard as the gigantic MAC hurled a three thousand ton projectile at nearly half the speed of light. The huge projectile instantly smashed into the cruiser before it could fire its plasma torpedoes. The red light dissipated into space and the Covenant ship exploded from the force of the impact. An unlucky Covenant frigate passed behind the cruiser and was also hit by the massive projectile. Large pieces of shrapnel from both ships exploded in every direction.

"Any other targets in the kill-zone?" Hood asked.

"No sir, nothing yet," replied Lieutenant Lockhardt.

"Lieutenant Owen, how is the fleet doing?" Admiral Hood swiveled in his chair.

"They're holding their own, sir," Lieutenant Owen typed a few commands and the main viewscreen showed the main battle.

"Zoom in on the _Preston Cole_, Lieutenant," Lord Hood requested.

"Aye sir," Owen replied. The view zoomed in until the strange triangular ship, now dubbed the Preston Cole, filled most of the screen. A plasma torpedo splashed on its hull and a bright silver light engulfed the ship. The torpedo didn't even leave a scratch. The energy shield on the Preston Cole was more resilient than anything the Humans ever encountered. It could withstand twice the amount of firepower than normal Covenant shields. This baffled the Human scientists quite a bit. Since, the Covenant's technology was all imitated from other cultures, it left one to wonder why this ship's technology was far greater than everything else the Covenant had, especially if the Forerunners made the ship as the Master Chief had speculated.

A purple beam of light shot from the nose of the spaceship. Several thousand kilometers off screen, the beam struck a Covenant destroyer. The ship exploded as the beam passed through the main reactor. The firepower on the Preston Cole was certainly impressive, but it wasn't enough to give the Humans the upper hand against the Covenant.

"Sir," the Admiral snapped out of his daydream when Lieutenant Owen spoke. "We're receiving another transmission from the Solaris outpost. Nearly two hundred more Covenant ships have arrived in the system, but are holding position outside the asteroid belt."

Admiral Hood let out a long sigh. "Damn, they must have brought their entire fleet here. Is there any way of getting more reinforcements?"

"Any reinforcements we call for won't be here for at least another twelve hours, sir," Owen replied.

"Five hundred Covenant ships against two hundred fifty UNSC ships and defense stationsâ€¦" the Admiral trailed off into thought. There was no way the Humans would be able to survive this.

"Sir, the Covenant ships beyond the asteroid belt are trying to contact usâ€¦ on our own priority Alpha channel," Lieutenant Owe was very confused at this. Why would the Covenant want to talk to the Humans? They seemed very intent on erasing the Humans from existence, so they obviously weren't asking the Humans to surrender.

"Put it through on the main screen," Admiral Hood stood up and walked to the main viewscreen. The faces that appeared startled the Admiral so much that he involuntarily took a step backwards. For the faces he saw on the screen did not belong to any of the known Covenant species. These were Human faces.

"Keyes! Johnson!" Lord Hood said after regaining his composure.

"I have a lot to tell you, but little time say it in, sir," Keyes said quickly.

"Go on, I won't interrupt," Hood acknowledged. Suddenly he saw the unmistakable figure of an Elite walked behind the Commander. I hope she has an answer for that he thought.

"The Covenant you're fighting now isn't the whole Covenant anymore," the Commander explained. "It only consists of Brutes, Jackals, Drones, and is led by the Prophets. Everyone else, the Elites,

Hunters, and Grunts, have broken off from the Covenant. There's no time to explain why, but now the two factions are in a kind of civil war. The Elites now call their faction the Holy Crusaders. They ask to call a truce join us in the fight against the Covenant."

"This is very surprising news, Commander," the Admiral replied. "But how do I know that we can trust these 'Holy Crusaders?'"

"Don't worry about it, Admiral. I can vouch for them," a new voice was heard but nobody besides Keyes and Johnson were in the picture.

"Cortana?" Admiral Hood was again very surprised. Cortana's purple figure suddenly appeared on the screen next to Commander Keyes.

"Yes, Admiral," Cortana said. "These Elites have sworn not to hurt the Commander and Sergeant Johnson while they have been on this ship. They are willing to ally themselves with us to defeat what's left of the Covenant."

"Is that so?" Lord Hood was still a little hesitant about this whole situation. "Let me speak to whoever is in command there."

On the screen, Keyes turned and gestured for someone off screen to come over. An Elite clad in strange, and obviously ceremonial, armor walked on screen and stood behind Keyes and Johnson.

"I am the Arbiter, Supreme Commander of the Holy Crusaders," the Elite said with a powerful voice.

"Yes, I see that," Hood seemed unimpressed. "Tell me, why should we ally with you? You expect us to forget about the thirty years that you slaughtered us just like that?" Hood snapped his fingers.

"I understand your apprehension," the Arbiter began, "but we realize, only too late, that we have been fighting against the wrong race. For over half an age we were led to believe that your destruction was the will of the Gods. Not only did we find out the truth that those 'Gods' were not what they seemed but we found that the Prophets have been lying to us for thousands of your years."

"Took you long enough," Lord Hood muttered under his breath.

"And now that we are at war with the Prophets as you are, we hope to join together with you and fight for our common cause," the Arbiter said.

"Well, it's against my better judgment, but it looks like we need all the help we can get," Admiral Hood said reluctantly.

"We will make you proud," the Arbiter bowed. "Tell us what we may do to help. We will follow your orders."

"I need you to attack the Covenant from the opposite side our forces are attacking," Admiral Hood ordered. "You'll be able to take them by surprise that way."

"I will move my fleet into position right away," the Arbiter bowed once more and walked off the screen.

"Admiral, with all due respect, how is the UNSC fleet supposed to know not to fire on the Holy Crusader ships?" Lieutenant Owen asked from the comm. station. "Don't their ships look exactly like the Covenant ships?"

Admiral Hood stared blankly for a moment and then turned to Cortana on the screen, "Cortana, is there any way we can distinguish the Crusader ships from the Covenant ships?"

"Actually, there is a friend-or-foe identifier on the UNSC ships," Cortana explained. "It is widely unused since our enemy's ships look different from our own. You could send a message to the fleet saying to use the identifier and to label the inbound Covenant ships as friendly."

"Good thinking, Cortana. I had completely forgotten about that option" Hood was relieved. He turned to Lieutenant Owen, "Get working on that message, Lieutenant."

"Aye sir," she replied and turned back to her station.

"We have to go, Admiral," Commander Keyes said. "We're doing an intra-system jump to get to the battle quicker."

"Very well, Commander. Good luck," the Admiral said.

Keyes and Johnson snapped a crisp salute, which Admiral Hood returned, and the screen returned to the main battle.

Holy Crusader Flagship Perpetual Devotion_ near Earth_

8th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation (Covenant Holy Calendar)

1415 hours, October 27, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

The vision of a blue and green planet with a small grey moon and a bright orange star in the distance replaced the utter blackness that was Slipspace. Through Slipspace the Holy Crusader fleet traveled two hundred fifty million kilometers in a matter of seconds and arrived in the exact position the Human said. As expected, the Covenant did not see the Holy Crusaders until the latter was almost on top of the former.

"Prepare for a volley!" the Arbiter shouted. "Arm all plasma turrets and pulse lasers."

"Plasma turrets arming. Laser turrets are ready," announced the red-armored Sangheili called Preko 'Kreyamee at the weapons panel.

The _Perpetual Devotion_ was at the point of the conic formation consisting of nearly two hundred Holy Crusader vessels. It was a very vulnerable position for the flagship, but once it fired the first volley the rest of the fleet would follow suit. This would allow the flagship to drop back to a safer position.

"Target the nearest destroyer," the Arbiter said. The bridge crew held on as the ship rotated to port, revealing its flank to the Covenant ship

"Plasma turrets are ready to fire," 'Kreyamee said.

"Fire torpedoes!" yelled the Arbiter.

Seven balls of glowing red plasma floated toward the Covenant destroyer. After several seconds, hundreds more passed the flagship as the rest of the fleet fired. The plasma torpedoes from the Perpetual Devotion then splashed against the shield of the Covenant destroyer in front of it. The destroyer's shield flared bright silver as the first three torpedoes hit and flickered out as the last four impacted the hull. The plasma burned through several layers of reinforced metal as the crew of the destroyer struggled to contain the fires on board.

"Fire lasers!" the Arbiter ordered.

Blue streaks of light flashed towards the destroyer. Several small explosions erupted where the lasers hit. Now the plasma had burned all the way through the ship in some places. A few small black patches started to appear and grow. Finally the lights on the destroyer flickered out and the ship drifted dead still being melted by the plasma.

"'Broktomee, slow us down. Let the rest of the fleet overtake us," the Arbiter said.

"Yes, Arbiter," Lasto 'Broktomee obliged and pressed a few buttons on the operations panel.

Commander Keyes walked up to the Arbiter with a confused look, "Why are we falling back? Why aren't we fighting?"

"Our purpose in this flagship is to initiate the battle and then watch from afar to make tactical decisions," the Arbiter explained. "We will only join the battle when our forces grow thin."

"I see," the Commander anxiously watched the viewscreens. Hundreds of plasma torpedoes impacted the Covenant ships. Combined with the Human weapons from the opposite side, the newly allied force did considerable damage to the Covenant fleet. The Humans were already interspersed within the Covenant ranks as the Holy Crusaders rushed in. Like a cavalry charge in the days of old, the Holy Crusaders' conic formation plowed into the Covenant fleet splitting it in two. Explosions filled the battlefield. Blobs of red plasma flew in all directions. Blue flashes from pulse lasers jumped from ship to ship. White-hot slugs from shipboard and Super MACs blazed through the blackness of space leaving holes in Covenant vessels. And trails of smoke lingered all over the battlefield as missiles traveled through space.

The Covenant fleet was reduced by a third in just over five minutes. The attack from the Holy Crusaders had worked. They caught the Covenant by complete surprise and the latter had paid dearly for it. When the Crusaders had broken all the way through the Covenant lines they started to push outwards. The Human ships regrouped with the

Crusaders and contributed to the effort. The Covenant, now significantly outnumbered, began to retreat. One by one, the Covenant ships started to disappear into Slipspace.

"Arbiter, the Covenant is retreating!" 'Broktomee announced.

"Those Jiralhanae cowards," 'Kreyamee sneered.

"Something's not right," commented Commander Keyes. "From past experiences I know that the Covenant wouldn't retreat from a large battle unless it was a distraction for somethingâ€¦| Arbiter, hail the _Cairo_!"

"'Barukomee, you heard the Commander," the Arbiter asserted.

'Barukomee punched a few buttons on the communications panel and the face of the older Human appeared on the forward viewscreen. Commander Keyes and the Arbiter walked up to the screen.

"Admiral Hood, did the Covenant launch any Phantoms before they left?" Keyes asked.

"No, Commander, We have scanned multiple times but have found nothing," the Admiral replied. "I'm sure you're thinking the same thing, but something isn't right. The Covenant wouldn't just give up like that."

"The Jiralhanae are not as persistent as we Sangheili are," the Arbiter said.

"It appears so, Arbiter," the Admiral agreed. "They also use very different tactics. But that can't be the whole reason why they left."

"Perhaps, but you may be overestimating the Jiralhanae's intelligence," stated the Arbiter.

"And you may be _under_estimating them, just as you did us," Hood retorted. "It is better to prepare for more than you expect than to be caught off your guard. But the reason for the Covenant retreat will have to wait. Tell your fleet to orbit the planet and prepare for an attack from any direction if the Covenant decides to return."

"As you wish, Admiral," the Arbiter nodded his head slightly.

"However," the Admiral continued, "I am going to give you special coordinates and I want your ship to rendezvous with one of our ships there. We need to talk this 'alliance' over."

"Right away," the Arbiter nodded once more before walking away from the screen. He then began to give the orders to fleet.

"We are glad to have you and Johnson back, Commander," the Admiral smiled. "By the way, where is your ship?"

"It was overrun by the Flood, sir," Keyes answered. "It is still back at that other Halo, but it is inoperable."

"I see," Admiral Hood didn't like the sound of that. "Well when the Arbiter's ship meets up with mine, I want you and Johnson to come with him. Oh, and bring Cortana too."

"Yes, sir," Keyes said as she saluted the Admiral.

"You will receive more info in due time. Hood out," the Admiral returned the salute. Admiral Hood's face suddenly disappeared and was replaced by a beautiful view of Earth. Several large dots that were the orbital defense stations were seen scattered around the planet several hundred miles above the surface. A mixture of grey and purple ships from both the UNSC and the Holy Crusaders moved towards the planet preparing to orbit.

A unit passed as the _Perpetual Devotion_ waited at the given coordinates for a single Human ship. The Arbiter started to wonder if that obviously high ranked Human forgot to meet him there. But as the Arbiter finished his thought he saw a ship moving towards them on the forward viewscreen. The ship was not like any Human ship the Arbiter had ever seen. In fact, it reminded him of a monument, or what he thought was a monument, in the center of the Covenant holy city of High Charity. The ship eventually slowed and stopped right next to the _Perpetual Devotion_.

"Arbiter, a Human dropship is requesting permission to land in hangar two," Teru 'Barukomee announced.

"Allow them entrance," the Arbiter replied. He turned around to the gold-armored Sangheili waiting in the back of the bridge, "'Zerrazee, you have command of this ship until I come back. I am going to meet the Humans in the hangar."

"Best of luck to you, Arbiter," 'Zerrazee gave the Arbiter a nod and took the latter's place. The Arbiter walked out of the bridge followed by Commander Keyes and Sergeant Johnson.

Fleet Admiral Hood stepped out of the Pelican onto the floor of the Covenant flagship's hangar with Master Chief Petty Officer John-117 right behind him. Lord Hood looked around the hangar for a bit and saw the Elite apparently known as the Arbiter walking in from his right. Behind the Arbiter were Commander Keyes and Sergeant Johnson. Keyes was carrying a small disk with her.

"Commander, Sergeant, if you would please get into the Pelican I would like to get moving as soon as possible," Hood requested.

Keyes and Johnson briefly saluted and walked past Admiral Hood and John. As Miranda walked past John, she handed him the disk, which he promptly inserted into a slot in his helmet.

"Arbiter, if you would like to bring any of your officers you are welcome to. And you may tell your bridge crew to join up with the rest of the fleet when we have left," Admiral Hood said.

"Yes, I will bring a few," the Arbiter replied before walking off to what looked like a small speaker on the wall. He said a few things in his native tongue and returned to Admiral Hood and his entourage. After several minutes, four Elites walked into the hangar and greeted the Arbiter. They all wore armor of different colors, some of which the Admiral had never seen. One had blindingly white armor, that of a covert ops general. Another, also white, had the dressings of the Honor Guard. The two others, one clad in violet armor and the other in red robes with gold trim, held positions that were currently unknown by the Humans.

"Are we ready?" Admiral Hood asked.

"Yes, we are ready," the Arbiter answered. And with that, the Admiral stepped into the Pelican followed by the Elites. The Master Chief was the last one onboard. He would make sure the Elites didn't try anything stupid.

14. Ch 13: Negotiations

****Chapter 13: Negotiations****

UNSC High Command (HighCom) Facility Alpha-1, London, England, Earth

9th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation (Covenant Holy Calendar)

1155 hours, October 28, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

The Arbiter stood in a small waiting room with his three companions. The room was fairly small and the Sangheili's heads nearly scraped the ceiling. The Arbiter and his companions would have sat while they waited, but the Human chairs scattered around the room were too small for their bulky forms. The Arbiter had chosen his most trusted subordinates to accompany him. These negotiations would be a very sensitive matter and he didn't want to gamble anything. The Humans must agree to a permanent alliance or risk utter annihilation. The Covenant fleet they had chased off during the previous cycle was still only a fraction of the entire armada, but if these negotiations were successful they would be able to survive against the onslaught of the Covenant.

The Arbiter began to admire the paintings and photographs that hung on the walls. Several depicted battles that the Arbiter guessed were very significant in Human history. However there were two that stood out from the rest. One showed a group of Human soldiers hoisting a flag with stripes and stars atop a small hilltop. The pride on the Humans' faces rivaled the pride his own people carried. The other showed a modern Human cruiser flying straight into a Covenant destroyer. The painting depicted the moment before impact as the Human ship sacrificed itself to destroy its adversary. The caption below said "Admiral Cole's Last Stand." Suddenly the Arbiter made a connection with the painting. He was there. He saw that sacrifice.

The large silver metal double doors opened and interrupted the Arbiter's thoughts. Two male Humans clad in dark green armor walked out of the dark doorway and stood on either side of it.

"The council is ready to see you now," one of them spoke.

Without a word, the five Sangheili officers filed through the doorway. The room they stepped into was pitch black save a single circle of light in the center. The Arbiter's eyes slowly adjusted to the dark and he could barely make out several shadows along the wall opposite the door. It was impossible to see anything more, but the Arbiter knew that the Humans in the shadows were of great importance. The two Humans at the door followed them in and the doors sealed shut.

"Please stand in a line in the light," said a scratchy male voice from somewhere in the dark. The voice obviously belonged to an older man who was most likely the head of the council.

The Sangheili obeyed and lined up in the spotlight. The Arbiter's eyes suddenly readjusted to the bright light and the shadows against the wall disappeared. Once in place, the Arbiter heard movement behind them and guessed that it was more guards.

"Please state your name and rank one at a time," the voice said again.

The Sangheili officer in white armor stepped forward first, "I am called Kado 'Toromee. I hold the rank of Field Master in the Covert Operatives branch of the Holy Crusaders." And with a slight bow, 'Toromee stepped back in line.

"I am called Brotu 'Ralkosomee," said the Sangheili with elaborately decorated armor as he stepped forward. "I am a Junior Master of the Holy Crusader Honor Guard."

"I am Arro 'Lyystokee," the Sangheili clad in violet stepped forward. "I am a Medical Master of the Holy Crusader Medical Corps."

"I am Keldorx," the Sangheili wearing red robes with golden trim said as he too stepped forward. "I am a High Priest of the Sangheili ancient religion."

Finally, when all had given their names, the Arbiter stepped forward, "And I am the Arbiter, the Supreme Commander of the Holy Crusaders."

"Do you not have a name, Arbiter?" the voice in the dark asked before the Arbiter stepped back into the line.

"I have lost the right to my own name," the Arbiter replied.

"Very well," the mysterious voice continued. "Why have you come before this council?"

"We offer our assistance to you in your struggle against the Covenant," the Arbiter answered.

A soft murmur arose in the dark as several Humans discussed the Arbiter's statement. After several minutes the old male spoke up, "And what is the reason for your offer?"

"We believe that our two forces now fight for a common cause," the

Arbiter started to explain.

"A common cause?" a new voice spoke before the Arbiter could continue. This voice was deeper than the first. "And what might that be?"

"Survival," the Arbiter said firmly.

"Tell me, Arbiter," the first male said, "How is it that your race is struggling for survival? Why are you not fighting for the Covenant anymore?"

"We have been betrayed by the Prophets," the Arbiter began. "They have tricked us and lied to usâ€"

"And you just realized this now?" retorted the second male.

After chastising the younger male with a barely audible "Be quiet," the older male said to the Arbiter, "I apologize. Continue."

"One of our brothers came into contact with an Oracleâ€| pardon me, a Monitor," the Arbiter explained more. "The Monitor had told him the truth about the Halos, and he started to spread the word among the Sangheili. The Prophets labeled him and his followers as heretics because of this. It is obvious that the Prophets did not want us to find out the truth about the Halos. I am unsure whether the Prophets are completely oblivious to the truth or they know full well what the Halos do and have a very twisted and diabolical plan. But when more and more Sangheili started to learn the truth, the Prophets and their Jiralhanae puppets attacked. They caught us by surprise and nearly obliterated the entire fleet we had surrounding High Charity. We do have other fleets elsewhere, but until we can contact them this is all we have."

"You do realize you brought this upon yourselves, right?" a new voice belonging to a female spoke this time.

"We fell prey to the Prophets' power of persuasion," the Arbiter said. "Keldorx can tell you more."

The robed Sangheili stepped forward to explain but was cut off. "Yes, we know now how one can easily be seduced by a Prophet's words," the second male said. "We are currently holding a Prophet prisoner, and all attempts to interrogate it have failed."

The Arbiter was taken aback by this last comment. _How had the Humans managed to capture a Prophet? And which one?_ he thought.

"This council is hesitant about the proposed alliance, but we will accept your offer," the first male abruptly changed the subject, "However, you must accept our accept our non-negotiable terms in return."

"We will consider whatever terms you pose, yet we only ask for your allegiance," the Arbiter said.

The first male continued, "First, for there to be an alliance between us you must follow any orders given by UNSC Generals or Admirals. You are now their subordinates. Second, if any UNSC forces die by Holy Crusader hands, those responsible will be sentenced to death. If such

an infraction occurs several times, the alliance will be terminated. Third, Holy Crusader forces are not allowed to set foot on Earth unless given permission. And finally, all Holy Crusader ships and ground personnel are to be put under UNSC supervision. If any ship or ground battalion is away from the main host, it must report to or contact their supervising officer every twelve hours. Failure to do so will result in a court martial. Will you accept these terms?"

"May I talk your terms over with my companions?" the Arbiter asked.

"You may, but please make it quick," the first male agreed.

The Sangheili huddled together in the middle of the circle of light. The Arbiter then asked them, "Do any of you oppose to these terms?"

All said no save for Brotu 'Ralkosomee. The young Sangheili's arrogance got the better of him and he retorted, "I will not take orders from a Human, Arbiter!"

"Calm down, Brotu," the Arbiter put his hand on Brotu's shoulder to reassure him. "You will not have to take orders from the Humans. You are of the Honor Guard; your orders will come directly from me."

'Ralkosomee gave the Arbiter a slight nod in acknowledgement as the Arbiter took his hand from Brotu's shoulder. The Arbiter quickly glanced at the others in the circle and asked, "Any other objections?"

The Sangheili said no once more. The Arbiter then turned to face where the Human voices came from.

"Do you have a consensus?" the voice belonging to the female inquired.

"Yes, we agree to your terms," the Arbiter said with a slight bow.

"Good," the first male said. He started to say something else, but the other male cut him off.

"How do we know we can trust them, General?" the second male quietly said, unaware of the Sangheili's much keener sense of hearing.

The Arbiter heard the statement that would have been barely audible to Human ears and responded proudly, "We will gladly spill our blood in battle alongside your people."

"Is that enough to reassure you?" the General whispered to the other male.

The second male grumbled incoherently in obvious displeasure.

"Now, unless any of the men and women on this council have any objections," the General paused to wait for someone one to speak up. When nobody did, he continued, "The alliance between the United Nations Space Command and the Holy Crusaders is official."

The five Sangheili gave a bow at the completion of the negotiations.

"You may go back to your fleet and give them the news now," the female said.

"However," the General quickly added, "At zero six hundred hours tomorrow the UNSC requires your presence on the Preston Cole, the flagship that brought you here. That is when we will decide upon a plan of attack. And you may bring some of your Ship Masters with you."

"We will be there," the Arbiter said with a nod.

"Good," the General said. "Master Chief, you and your team will escort our new allies to the ship."

"Sir!" a sharp voice came from behind the Sangheili.

At that, the Arbiter and his companions turned and marched single file toward the now open door in the back of the room. An armored shadow appeared in front of the file as well as several more flanking the line of Sangheili. Once they entered the light of the waiting room the Arbiter saw that these armored figures were indeed what he thought they were. Demons.

15. Ch 14: Reminiscence

Chapter 14: Reminiscence

The Burning Plains, Tau Thorazon V

46th Cycle, 1st Division, 49th Stage, 8th Age of Reclamation
(Covenant Holy Calendar)

1635 hours, February 15, 2498 (UNSC Military Calendar)

"Warriors! Remember your oaths!" shouted a large Sangheili clad in gold as he paced in front of several thousand young recruits.

"According to our station! All without exception!" the recruits replied in crisp unison.

"On the blood of your fathers, on the blood of your sons, do you swear to uphold the Covenant?" the Field Master bellowed.

"Even to our dying breath!" came the unison response.

"What is your purpose in the Covenant?"

"To protect the Prophets, and safeguard the Great Journey!"

"On the field of battle, what will you do?"

"We will stand our ground, and we will not falter!"

"In the face of the enemy, what will you do?"

"We will crush them into the ground, and wipe them from existence!"

"In the face of defeat, what will you do?"

"We will stand firm, and prevail over those who try to stop us!"

"In the face of death, what will you do?"

"We will laugh, and continue to fight until we can fight no longer!"

"Those who would break this oath are heretics!"

"They are worthy of neither pity, nor mercy!"

"And in the face of such heresy, what will you do?"

"We will grind them into dust, and scrape them as excrement from our boots!"

"And continue our march to glorious salvation!" the Field Master shouted as he raised a fist high in the air.

A young warrior in the back row of the host of Sangheili warriors looked anxiously around. Every single warrior in the main block wore the same blue armor he had. Standing in the front facing the host were a handful of red armored officers and the single Field master.

"I will give the command to fire when we are in range," the Field Master spoke up again. "If a warrior in the front dies, the warrior behind is to take his place. When the enemy is upon us, unleash your blades upon them."

The young warrior in the back could not see the Field Master, but he could hear him. Moments after the latter stopped talking, the Sangheili host marched forward as one. Soon enough, the march slowly turned into a jog.

"Fire your weapons!" the Field Master yelled.

The sound of plasma rifles firing traveled far across the open desert that was the battlefield. Suddenly, explosions were heard as well as the plasma. He looked towards the front of the host and saw several Sangheili bodies flailing in the air as they were tossed by the explosions. Plumes of fire, smoke, and sand followed the flying bodies. The young warrior looked up and saw scores of large blue balls of plasma coming from the Wraith mortar tanks behind the host. The plasma continued to fly and the explosions continued to whittle away at the Sangheili host for what seemed like an eternity.

Surprisingly, the Field Master's voice was heard above the din, "Wield your blades!"

As one, the staggered front row of the Sangheili host threw down their plasma rifles and pulled out their energy swords. Hundreds of blue flashes erupted from hundreds of hilts as the energy swords

flashed to life. The host then turned their jog into a full sprint. The Sangheili met their enemy with incredible force and they cut through the latter's lines with ease. As the Sangheili host finally slowed as the front lines of both sides became indistinguishable. As the young warrior in the back continued forward to meet the enemy, large reptilian bodies and severed appendages started to appear on the ground in front of him. The Sangheili ranks stepped over their fallen adversaries and continued to push them back.

The reptilian creatures the Sangheili fought, the Torgzim, may not have been the strongest race, but they were steadfast in their opposition to the Covenant religion. They also made up for their lack of strength with sheer numbers.

The lines of the Torgzim rapidly diminished as the Sangheili sliced their way through. However, over the crest of a small hill behind the Sangheili ranks a new horde of Torgzim charged. The Sangheili, now outnumbered four to one, were surrounded. The young Sangheili warrior in the back turned just in time to see the Torgzim toss hundreds of grenades at the Sangheili host.

"Behind!" roared the Field Master. "They come from behind!"

The rear of the Sangheili host charged at the new opposition and fired their plasma rifles. The young Sangheili warrior was unknowingly at the front of this charge. Not anticipating the charge, the Torgzim grenades overshot the new front line of the Sangheili and landed in the gap between two fronts. The Torgzim bodies that fell from the plasma assault were so numerous that the warriors behind the front lines had to start climbing over the fallen ones.

The Sangheili took the opportunity to smash through the new Torgzim front with their energy swords flailing. However, the young warrior in the front of the charge became overzealous. He pushed his way through the Torgzim lines and suddenly found himself surrounded. He tried to push his way back to his brethren but the throng around him continued to occupy his actions. His efforts became more desperate as the Torgzim began to push the Sangheili host back. The young warrior's hope began to run thin as the distance between him and the host increased.

Holy Crusader Flagship Perpetual Devotion_, in orbit around Earth_

10th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation (Covenant Holy Calendar)

0515 hours, October 29, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

The Arbiter suddenly awoke with a jolt. Breathing heavily, he rose from his bed and walked over where his armor hung on the wall. He slowly began to don the ceremonial armor worn by hundreds of Arbiters before him. All the while he could not stop thinking about the dream he had that night. No, it was not a dream. It was a memory. He would never forget that fateful day when he and nine other recruits stood over the fallen body of their Field Master holding off the Torgzim until reinforcements came at last. At one point he thought he would never see his comrades again after being stranded in the middle of

the Torgzim ranks. But a miraculous boost of adrenaline and luck gave him the strength to push back to his own ranks. He should have died that day along with the thousands of other Sangheili who fought valiantly beside him. But he could not change any of that now.

"Arbiter," Duku 'Zerrazee's voice came over the announcement system, "The Ship Masters are ready in hangar one."

The Arbiter strode over to the speaker on the wall, "Thank you 'Zerrazee. I am on my way."

The Arbiter at last put his helmet on and reached for the hilt of his energy sword on the wall. He remembered he was meeting with several high ranking Humans and checked the motion. They would never allow him to carry a weapon around that many important Humans. Once everything was set he left his private quarters and made his way to the hangar.

Twenty of the Holy Crusaders' best Ship Master stood next to two Phantoms awaiting the Arbiter's arrival. With them was the one armed Niko 'Gorlomee. He walked up to the Arbiter when he appeared in the doorway to the hangar. 'Gorlomee put his right hand on the Arbiter's left shoulder for a moment as the Arbiter did the same.

"We are ready, Arbiter," 'Gorlomee said.

"Good," the Arbiter said. He turned to the rest of the waiting Ship Masters, "Load up. We have little time."

One by one, the twenty golden armored Sangheili floated up the gravity lifts of the two Phantoms. The Arbiter and 'Gorlomee entered the nearest.

"Take us to the Human's flagship," the Arbiter commanded as he entered the cockpit.

"Right away, Arbiter," the pilot replied.

The Phantom rumbled as it floated out of the Perpetual Devotion's hangar. The Arbiter watched Earth on the left viewscreen in the windowless cockpit. Such a beautiful planet, he thought. Despite the short time he spent on the Human's planet, Earth reminded the Arbiter of his home planet, Sanghoro. The lush, green fields, thick forests, and vast seas made him homesick. The Arbiter had not seen his home since the start of the Human-Covenant war, and now he wanted to go back. He wanted this whole thing to be over. He wanted to just relax with his mate till the end of his ages.

The Arbiter continued to watch the Earth fly by out of the corner of his eye, but his main focus was now the new Human flagship, the Preston Cole. The large triangular ship quickly grew as they neared. Soon, a small blue translucent rectangle appeared on the side of the ship and the pilot steered in its direction. The blue shield of the hangar dissipated when the Phantoms were close enough.

When the Phantoms had landed, the Arbiter and the Ship Masters exited. The Arbiter noticed that several Demons marched in to escort the Sangheili. The large, green armored soldiers stepped in unison in a single file. They looked more like robots than Humans, and the fact

that the Arbiter had never seen a Demon without armor made it that much more believable.

"Come with me," the lead Demon said as he stepped up to the Arbiter.

The Arbiter and his fellow Sangheili followed and the six other Demons flanked them. They wended through the twisting hallways of the flagship as if with caution. Though the Sangheili were completely unarmed, the Humans did not want to take any chances. They finally entered a large room with an elliptical table in the middle. About twenty high ranking Humans sat at the far side of the table.

"Good of you to join us, Arbiter," the Human the Arbiter recognized as being Admiral Hood stood up and tipped his hat in greeting. "Please, sit down, and we may begin."

The Sangheili were reluctant to sit down, but when they saw that the seats were in fact form fitting and not shaped for Humans they all sat down at the table.

"Now," Admiral Hood began, "It has been approximately forty hours since the Covenant last attacked us. There must be something important on Earth for them to attack twice in three hours. However, after much interrogation, the Prophet of Truth has been averse in giving any information."

"Excuse me, but may I speak?" the Arbiter politely interrupted.

"By all means, Arbiter, speak your mind," the Admiral returned the Arbiter's courtesy.

"How did you manage to capture the Prophet of Truth?" he asked. "I was told you had captured a Prophet, but I assumed it was one of lesser status. Truth is the High Prophet."

"The Master Chief here captured him and this ship for us," the Admiral gestured towards one of the Demons standing around the perimeter of the room. The one whom the Admiral pointed to immediately saluted.

"That would explain a lot then," the Arbiter replied.

"Would you care to enlighten us?" Admiral Hood asked.

"Well, unless any of the lesser Prophets stepped up, the Covenant has no leader," the Arbiter explained. "And Tartarus, the Chieftain of the Jiralhanae has been killed. So at the moment, the leaders of the Covenant are either nonexistent, or very inexperienced. Hence the strange tactics. I suggest we attack now while the Covenant leadership is in disarray."

"I agree, this is the best time to attack," a brown haired Human said; the nametag on his uniform read "F. Schmidt." "However, where do you suppose we attack, Arbiter? We have no information about where any of Covenant planets are."

"No, but we do," the Arbiter replied. "Our navigational databases hold the location of every known Covenant held planet."

"It looks like luck has turned in our favor then," the Fleet Admiral spoke again. "Do you have a suggestion of where to strike first?"

"Tactically, the best place to strike would be the Prophet homeworld of Gantrithos," the Arbiter said. "But it will be heavily guarded."

"Do you think our fleet would be able to break the Covenant defenses there?" the Human named Schmidt asked again.

"I am not sure how large the fleet defending the planet is," the Arbiter stated. "I have not been there in a very long time, so they may have increased the number of ships."

"The Covenant fleet around Gantrithos is approximately five hundred ships strong," 'Gorlomee inputted. "I was rotated out of the Gantrithos defense fleet no more than a division ago, or seventy-three of your days."

"Well, that answers your question then, Commodore," Hood said. "We have been getting reinforcements almost constantly for the last twenty-four hours, and the number of UNSC ships orbiting Earth now is over four hundred. This is the largest gathering of UNSC ships in the history of mankind. However, we are taking a great risk. Our forces are running dangerously thin in the rest of the Inner Colonies. So if we are to attack, we must do it before the Covenant attacks us elsewhere."

"Appending our forces to yours, we will outnumber the Covenant fleet, but not by much," the Arbiter added.

"Arbiter," 'Gorlomee said softly in the Arbiter's ear, "If we are going to Gantrithos, we could pick up reinforcements en route. We can stop at Voronia and pick up the Sangheili fleet there. It would add at least another hundred to our forces and it would only add another eight units to the journey."

"My companion here tells me that if we take an extra two hours, we can pick up reinforcements of our race on our way to Gantrithos," the Arbiter reiterated 'Gorlomee's suggestion. "What say you about this plan?"

"I say we go ahead and do it," a new Human spoke up. This one was female and bore a tag with the name "M. Thompson" engraved on it. She added, "We need all the help we can get."

"Does anyone have any objections?" Hood asked the other Humans. All shook their heads side to side. "Very well. Arbiter, we will follow your ships wherever you lead us."

Just then, the Demon that saluted earlier approached the table. He put his hand on a small panel on the edge and the purple figure the Arbiter recognized as the Human construct Cortana appeared in the middle of the tabletop.

"Admiral Hood, before we depart I have data that will greatly decrease the time it takes to travel through Slipspace," Cortana announced. "We will need to reprogram our Slipspace drives with this new data otherwise the Holy Crusader ships will arrived at our

destination several days before we do." She turned to face the Arbiter, "May we borrow several hundred of your Engineers to reprogram our Slipspace drives?"

"Of course," the Arbiter answered. "We will give you as many Huragok as it took to reprogram one of drives multiplied by however many vessels you have."

"Good, we have four hundred eighteen ships in our fleet," Cortana said. "If it takes as long to reprogram our drives as it did with the Holy Crusaders, we should be able to leave about twenty minutes after their Engineers arrive."

"Good work, Cortana," Admiral Hood praised her. Cortana gave him a nod and disappeared. "Does anybody else have anything to add?"

The female Human stood up, "I have something to add, Fleet Admiral."

"The floor is yours, Rear Admiral Thompson," Hood said.

"I suggest that when we arrive at this Gantrithos planet that we push through the Covenant defenses and launch a massive invasion force to take out the Prophet leadership," Admiral Thompson proposed. "Once we launch the invasion, we should retreat out system and then push back. Hopefully we can force the Covenant to clump together, which will be to our advantage. Our weapons are more effective when the enemy is clustered close together. We should attack as a fleet, and not like the small sporadic battles that took place here during the first Covenant attack."

"Any objections?" Admiral Hood asked when Thompson sat down. When nobody said anything he continued, "Well, this has been a successful meeting. You may all return to your ships and prepare your crews. We will leave at ten hundred hours."

At that, everyone at the table stood and left. A select few Humans went over and shook the hands of a handful of Sangheili to show their friendship. They knew that for this alliance to work they would have to befriend the aliens. The Sangheili, unfamiliar with the Humans' gestures, returned their own gesture of friendship, which was to place one's right hand on the recipient's left shoulder.

After the few signs of friendship were made, the Sangheili Ship Masters left as one. Once again being escorted by the Demons, they made their way to the Phantoms and then back to their own ships.

16. Ch 15: Pre Battle Jitters

****Chapter 15: Pre-Battle Jitters****

_UNSC Cruiser _Talon_, In Slipspace Near Planet Gantrithos_

_11th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation
(Covenant Holy Calendar)_

2120 hours, October 30, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

"ETA to Gantrithos is thirty minutes, Commodore," announced the disembodied voice of Franklin, the _Talon_'s shipboard AI.

Commodore Frank Schmidt yawned as he woke from a short nap in his command chair. "Good, wake the rest of the crew from cryosleep. And let me know when everyone is back at their posts."

"Yes, sir," Franklin replied.

The long Slipspace trip had caused Frank to lose quite a bit of sleep. The trip was just long enough to require the ship to run on a three shift skeleton crew while the rest were put in cryosleep to save resources. The crew that was still awake worked three rotating eight hour shifts with four hour breaks in between. Among those still awake was the entire bridge crew. Hopefully the thirty-seven hours in Slipspace wouldn't take too much of a toll on the crew.

Frank stood up and stretched. He walked around the bridge and saw that Lieutenants Braxton and Ramirez were awake. He nudged Zheng and Rhodes and they groggily woke up.

"How is everyone feeling?" Schmidt asked.

"Fine, sir," the junior officers said in near unison.

"Good," the Commodore said as he made his way back to his command chair. He nervously tapped the armrest as he waited for the crew to be thawed. His pre-battle jitters weren't as bad as they were back at Earth, but that was because he wasn't defending his home anymore. His job now was to make sure his invasion force got to the surface of the planet and fall back. Simple enough.

"Sir, every member of the crew is now awake and at their posts," Franklin suddenly appeared after ten minutes of waiting.

"Excellent," Schmidt said, "Where are the Spartans?"

"Armory B-03, sir," Franklin replied as he pushed his holographic glasses up on his nose.

"Thank you, Franklin," Schmidt nodded at the AI as he stood up and walked out of the bridge.

The last of the Spartan supersoldiers helped each other don their half ton Mjolnir armor suits in the armory. After almost thirty years of wearing the Mjolnir Mark V & VI armor, they had gotten quite proficient at putting it on. They could now dress a fellow Spartan in less than five minutes when it took technicians nearly an hour to put the armor on a Spartan for the first time.

Commodore Schmidt, like most of Humanity, had never seen the Spartans without armor before, and to see them put the suits on was quite a site. Most of the parts were heavier than Schmidt could ever dream of lifting. The Spartans were much larger than normal Humans; all were around seven feet tall and had nearly four hundred pounds of muscle. Their skin was also very pale. Frank imagined that the Spartans typically didn't get much tanning time while in their armor. Despite

their size, he couldn't help but think about how vulnerable they must feel to be outside their armor.

"Officer on deck!" one of the Spartans suddenly shouted when he saw Frank watching them. As one, the seven Spartans stopped whatever they were doing, swiveled around and sharply saluted the Commodore. A few had full armor save for the helmet while the rest were still naked from the waist up. All of them, even the females, had biceps bigger than Schmidt's head. The Spartans were a very intimidating bunch.

"At ease, soldiers," Schmidt said. "I need to speak with Master Chief John-117 for a moment. The rest of you can continue dressing."

A Spartan that was undoubtedly the Master Chief strode up to the Commodore. He held himself with so much pride and honor that Schmidt could have mistaken him for a Fleet Admiral if he hadn't known the Chief's rank already.

"Sir," John saluted the Commodore, who subconsciously returned the gesture.

"It's good to meet you, Master Chief," Schmidt said as he extended his hand to the Chief.

"Likewise, sir," the Master Chief grasped Frank's hand and shook it. To Frank's surprise, John's grip was firm, but no firmer than any other person he had met.

"I assume you've been briefed on the invasion, Master Chief?" Schmidt asked.

"Yes, sir," Master Chief replied as he clasped his hands behind his back. The position made his muscles flex slightly, which further unnerved the Commodore.

"Then you already know that you'll be leading the assault," Schmidt assumed again. John nodded an acknowledgement and Schmidt continued, "Just as a reminder, the brass at HIGHCOM has given you command over all marine and naval forces on the ground, and the Arbiter has given you command over all the Crusader forces on the ground as well. Also, don't forget to pick up Cortana once you get your suit on. She will aid you once you reach the surface. We expect nothing less than your best on this mission, Master Chief."

"Aye, sir," John responded. "The Spartans always go beyond our best to make sure our missions succeed, sir."

"You will make Humanity proud, Chief. Good luck," Schmidt said as he saluted the Chief. John returned the crisp salute and continued to help his fellow Spartans dress.

Frank wished he had nerves of steel like John. Master Chief could charge into battle against overwhelming odds without fear. He obeyed any order given as long as it was a reasonable order. And he led the finest group of soldiers Humanity had ever known. John was the perfect soldier.

Staff Sergeant Jim Shank watched over his platoon of ODSTs as they loaded up their drop pods for the invasion. This was going to be the biggest invasion Humanity had ever seen. Each ship had at least one platoon of Orbital Drop Shock Troopers, or Helljumpers as they were sometimes called, and at least a hundred Pelicans loaded with marines. Not to mention the addition of the Holy Crusaders.

Before the Spartans came along, the ODSTs were considered the best the military had to offer. They were fearless. They had to be to drop from orbit in a small pod into enemy controlled territory. They were always the first ones on the ground.

However, as Sergeant Shank watched his troops pack, he couldn't help but notice how nervous they all looked. A little anxiety was a good thing, it increased adrenaline, but his troops were already past that point. Too much anxiety hinders thinking in the heat of battle. He couldn't blame them though. This was the Prophet homeworld. The war depended on this battle. The fate of the Human race depended upon this battle. Jim had to find some way to calm his soldiers down.

"Roberts, you alright?" Jim asked as he walked up behind the Private and put his hand on the Private's shoulder.

Private Roberts looked back at the Sergeant. "Yeah, boss. What's up?"

"Oh nothing, you guys just seem a little on edge, that's all," Shank replied.

"Yeah, typical pre-battle jitters. We'll be good once we get on the ground. I know I will be," Roberts seemed to be the calmest of them all.

"Well, this is a little more than 'typical' pre-battle jitters," Jim refuted. "We could be in serious trouble if the platoon is this nervous when we hit the ground."

"Don't worry about it boss," Private Roberts reassured. "Once the bullets start flying, all these guys will be thinking about will be kicking some Covenant ass. Kinda sounds like you need to calm down yourself, sir. We'll be fine."

"Yeah," Jim muttered under his breath. "Well, just keep packing. Not much longer till we drop."

"Yes, sir," Roberts saluted and returned to his packing.

Sergeant Shank continued to pace along the drop pod corridor and supervise his troops. Maybe he was overreacting. Maybe he did need to calm down. He got to his drop pod that he had already packed and leaned up against it. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. It didn't help. He reached into his pod and pulled a picture of him and his wife off the inside wall of the pod. He thought about his home back in the Alpha Centauri system, and how he hadn't seen it in four years. He took a few minutes to stare at the picture and finally calmed himself down.

"We'll be fine," Jim repeated Roberts's words.

Holy Crusader Flagship Perpetual Devotion_, In Slipspace Near
Planet Gantrithos_

"Prepare your warriors, Kado," the Arbiter said via comm. link. "We will exit the alternate dimension in three units, and launch the invasion force shortly after."

"Right away, Arbiter," Kado 'Toromee replied.

"One more thing, your warriors get the honor of leading our army in battle," the Arbiter announced.

"Thank you, Arbiter," 'Toromee said with a respectful nod.

"You deserve it. Make the Crusaders proud. And make the Humans proud to fight alongside us. Good luck," the Arbiter nodded in return and disappeared from the screen.

Kado put his helmet on and decided to stop at the _Perpetual Devotion_'s temple before heading to the armory. He walked in the large room and saw a robed figure kneeling on the altar in the middle of the temple. 'Toromee slowly approached the figure and waited for the figure to notice him. It wasn't long before the kneeling Sangheili stood up and removed the hood from his head.

"Forgive me if I'm interrupting, Keldorx," 'Toromee kindly said. "But do you have time to offer a blessing?"

"Never will I not have time, Kado," Keldorx said as he extended his arms to 'Toromee. 'Toromee knelt in the middle of the altar and Keldorx put his hands on the Field Master's armored shoulders.

"Oh, Gods of might and wonder, bless this warrior so he may better lead our armies," the priest began. "Guide his blade in this time of war, and guide his soul for the rest of his ages. Keep him under your eyes so he may return safely home."

Keldorx then touched the top of 'Toromee's head as the warrior bowed low. Kado touched his head to the metal floor and rose to his feet.

"Many thanks, Keldorx," 'Toromee said.

"Good luck, Kado," the priest replied.

Satisfied with the blessing, the Field Master finally made his way to the armory. Once there, he saw that his warriors were already donning their black armor. He paced down the center of the armory.

"Warriors, we have been chosen by the Arbiter to lead the Holy Crusaders into battle," the Field Master bellowed. The warriors in the armory responded with a roar while pumping their fists in the air.

"This is the greatest honor you will receive," 'Toromee continued. "To lead our army in open war on the home planet of the traitorous

Prophets." This was followed by another roar.

"The Army of Swift Revenge will be known as the greatest the Holy Crusaders ever had. Every warrior here will be forever remembered in Sangheili, Unggoy, and Lekgolo history from this cycle forward. Now, recite your new oaths of battle!"

"We spill our blood today to protect those who we wrongfully slaughtered," the warriors said in unison.

"Who is our enemy?"

"Those who once fought alongside us. The Prophets, and all who follow them shall be destroyed!"

"Who are our allies?"

"Together with the Humans we shall cleanse the galaxy. For all they have suffered by our hands, we owe our allegiance to them."

"The enemy will be ruthless and unrelenting. Show them no mercy, for you shall receive none."

"By bullet and blade we will strike them down until none remain standing."

"The Great Journey was a lie. We may never know the path to true salvation."

"Our faith is all we need. It guides our blades and our souls."

"Victory is at hand; this war of rage will soon be won."

"The Covenant will fall and peace will be restored in the galaxy."

"The Holy Crusaders will not be stopped!" 'Toromee finished the oath with a loud roar. "Finish preparing and make your way to the Phantoms. The invasion will commence in approximately two units."

17. Ch 16: Apocalypse Please, part 1

****Chapter 16: Apocalypse Please, part 1****

_UNSC Cruiser _Talon_, Inbound Vector Towards Planet Gantrithos_

11th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation (Covenant Holy Calendar)

2150 hours, October 30, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

"Exiting Slipspace in ten seconds, sir," Franklin announced. "Prepare for anything."

Suddenly, the black void on the three forward viewscreens started to boil away as the _Talon_ exited Slipspace. Several million kilometers

away the large Earthlike planet of Gantrithos was a small dot centered on the main viewscreen, and off to the left was a binary star system. The defending Covenant was orbiting the large planet, seemingly unaware of the incoming threat. Several UNSC ships were already out of Slipspace when the _Talon_ arrived, and the rest of the fleet was constantly appearing all around the _Talon_ until the cruiser was completely surrounded. Also, mixed in with the UNSC ships was the entire Holy Crusader fleet. Both the Arbiter and Fleet Admiral Hood, who had tactical command over the entire operation, decided it would be best to mix the fleets. The Holy Crusader ships were obviously stronger than the UNSC's, and if the fleets were separate the Crusader ships would break through the Covenant defenses before the UNSC. Both fleets needed to reach the planet at the same time.

The allied fleet accelerated as one towards Gantrithos. They used the same conic formation the Crusaders used at the Battle for Earth to better split the Covenant fleet. It didn't take long before the Covenant realized the imminent danger and turned to attack. The two sides accelerated towards each other.

"Cortana," Commodore Schmidt called. For the moment, the _Talon_ had two Artificial Intelligence constructs. Cortana had been installed in the ship's mainframe to help with ship operations during the battle until the Master Chief had to take her. Her violet holographic form replaced Franklin's as he faded away. "Can you estimate the size of the Covenant fleet?"

"One moment, sir," Cortana replied. Her color changed to a slightly blue hue and numbers and symbols started to scroll across her body as she calculated for several seconds. "I count five hundred eighty-three, plus or minus a couple ships. Compared to our combined fleet of six hundred sixty-eight, the odds are against us power-wise."

"Well, let's just hope our tactics are better than theirs," the Commodore said.

"Sir, incoming message from the _Preston Cole_, Priority Alpha," Lieutenant Maria Ramirez announced.

"Good, patch it through to my personal screen," Frank told her. Seconds later, the face of Lord Hood appeared on the small screen to his right.

"All ships listen up," Admiral Hood started. "You all know the plan, so stick to it. Keep this video feed up at all times. I will be giving and changing orders on the fly, and you don't want to miss anything. Good luck, everybody."

"Alright everyone, this is it," Schmidt tried to sound as in calm as possible. "Cortana, match the speed of the rest of the fleet."

"Aye, sir," Cortana said as the _Talon_'s engines started to rumble. The cruiser slowly accelerated and kept pace with the entire fleet.

"Sir, Covenant ships are directly ahead at one million kilometers and closing fast," Lieutenant JG Justin Braxton said from the ops station.

"Prepare for first volley!" Hood said to the entire fleet.

"Arm both MAC guns and Inferno pods A through J," the Commodore ordered.

"Infernos armed, MACs at forty percent," said weapons officer Lieutenant Derek Rhodes.

"You will all receive firing solutions from the AI here in a few moments," Hood explained.

"MACs at eighty percent," Rhodes announced.

"Firing solution received," Lieutenant Ramirez said as she patched it through to the weapons station. At the same time, Cortana disappeared and was replaced by a three dimensional tactical map of the sector. A single red line connected two highlighted ships, which represented the Talon and it's Covenant target. A countdown timer flashed above the holographic Talon. Twenty-eight seconds.

"Set everything to remote firing," Hood said.

"MAC guns are hot, sir. Remote firing is in effect," said Lieutenant Rhodes.

There was a brief pause while the crew waited for their weapons to fire automatically. The bridge was absolutely silent during the short seconds, which increased the tension tenfold. Frank watched the timer as it reached zero. The bridge crew slightly jumped when the rapid fire thumps of the Inferno missiles launching began. Millions of exhaust plumes streaked across the black void towards the daunting Covenant fleet, and several times a bright purple beam could be seen as the Preston Cole fired its main weapon. Each Covenant ship hit with one of those beams subsequently exploded as their vital systems were destroyed. The bridge of the Talon then lapsed into silence again waiting for the MAC guns to fire. Only moments after the UNSC launched their missiles, the Holy Crusaders launched their Plasma torpedoes. Frank noticed a secondary timer counting down for the MACs. When it reached zero, the lights on the bridge dimmed and the entire ship shuddered as the cruiser fire its four massive slugs. Everything the allied fleet threw at the Covenant was concentrated at the center of their defense. They planned to blow a hole in the middle and charge right through.

"Sir, the Covenant are preparing to fire," Braxton said.

"Good, that will give us bigger targets," Schmidt smiled. The Covenant had just made their first mistake. To fire, they had to rotate their ships so their flanks faced the incoming fleet, thus making themselves easier to hit.

Admiral Hood had planned for the allied fleet to break through the Covenant before they were able to return fire. Unfortunately, he was wrong. As the Covenant fleet turned, he could see the telltale red blobs of plasma already collected and prepared to fire.

"Damn it, evasive maneuvers!" Hood yelled. The fleet was too close to

the Covenant now. They wouldn't be able to evade the torpedoes in time, but they would have to try.

"Enemy torpedoes inbound, sir," said the Lieutenant from the ops station. "Impact in twenty seconds."

"Cortana, begin evasive maneuvers!" Frank shouted.

A few seconds after the Covenant had fired, the UNSC and Holy Crusader weapons impacted. The Covenant ships were still small purple blips on the main viewscreen when explosions started to replace the blips.

"We have contact, all weapons hit their intended targets," Cortana stated the good news. "The target area is clean. We can plow straight through the Covenant now."

"All we need to worry about are thoseâ€" Frank was cut off as the _Talon_ suddenly jumped to the left almost throwing him out of his chair.

"Torpedoes clear," more good news came from Cortana. "Unfortunately the frigate behind us caught both torpedoes and is now out of commission."

"How many of our ships were hit?" Schmidt asked.

"About fifty, sir," Cortana said. "There are still a few loose torpedoes out there but we can lose them in the Covenant wreckage."

"Hang on everyone! We're going straight through that debris field!" Admiral Hood said as Frank saw him on his video screen tightly grip the arms of his chair. "Let's see if we can shake those torpedoes off us as we go through."

The Covenant fleet was rapidly increasing in size, and Frank could see they were charging up for a second salvo. But they wouldn't be able to get it off quick enough. The allied fleet was moving faster than the Covenant ships could turn and before the Covenant could even fire their maneuvering thrusters the UNSC and Holy Crusaders flashed through the debris left in the wake of their first volley. The plasma torpedoes still following the fleet slammed into the floating carcasses of the Covenant vessels.

"We're through!" exclaimed Lieutenant Tao Zheng from the navigations console.

"All vessel, full reverse!" Admiral Hood ordered. "We've got to slow down, launch the invasion and turn around all in less than five minutes."

"Cortana, go find the Master Chief. You're going with him to the surface," said the Commadore. "Braxton, you heard the Admiral. Engines at full reverse. Lieutenant Zheng, rotate this ship so our belly is facing the planet"

"Aye, sir," came the unison response from both junior officers.

A loud rumble was heard as the _Talon_'s engines tried to slow the massive vessel down as quickly as they could. The planet Gantrithos started to rotate off the main viewscreen and appeared on the ventral screen.

Frank flipped a switch on the arm of his chair that said "lMC" and picked up the microphone on the side of the chair. "All invasion forces are to launch immediately!" he broadcasted to the entire ship. "I repeat: all invasion forces are to launch immediately!"

"Alright boys, this is it!" Staff Sergeant Shank tried to motivate his platoon. "It's time to kick some serious Covenant ass."

The ODS'Ts scrambled around their drop pods doing last minute checks before sealing themselves in. When everyone was secure, Jim ran up and down the aisle between the drop pods and slammed his fist onto the hatch of each pod before getting into his own. The soldiers had so much adrenaline that one could almost smell it. Sergeant Shank sealed the hatch on his pod and put his hand over the big red "drop" button. Once everyone's drop buttons were pushed, the entire platoon would begin their descent to the surface of the planet.

"Fasten your safety belts gentlemen, and please remain seated until your pod has come to a complete stop," Jim joked over the comm. link. He waited several seconds before pressing his drop button.

There was a loud clank as the clamp holding his pod in place opened. Jim felt a sudden feeling of weightlessness as his pod fell through space. The small viewscreen to his left showed the planet's surface racing towards him. He rotated the view to show the battle above him. The fleet was already turning back to engage the Covenant again. He saw tens of thousands of Pelicans and Phantoms following a couple hundred kilometers behind the drop pods. The entire invasion force was over a half million soldiers strong. Jim turned the view back underneath him and watched the ground grow. About ninety seconds into the drop he entered the atmosphere and fire filled his viewscreen. He felt his pod jerk as the airbrake automatically deployed. The pod jolted again after fifteen seconds when the airbrake was released and the reverse thrusters ignited. The Staff Sergeant could see more and more details as he neared the ground. He checked his altimeter: one kilometer to go. No more than a few seconds after he braced himself for impact did his pod slam into the ground.

Holy Crusader Destroyer Radiant Essence_, Near Planet Gantrithos_

"All ships about face as soon as your invasion forces have launched," the image of Fleet Admiral Hood said on a secondary viewscreen on the bridge of the _Radiant Essence_.

"Master, all forces have been launched," announced the red armored Sangheili at the operations panel.

"Very well," Niko 'Gorlomee responded. He stood on the raised central

platform of his ship intently monitoring the situation via the viewscreens and the data scrolling across the different officers' panels. "Blarghomee, rotate the vessel to face two-four-zero marks,"

"Rotating vessel to two-four-zero marks," replied Torvo "Blarghomee, the Sangheili stationed at the navigations panel.

"Ferukolee, push reactor five-fourths output," 'Gorlomee commanded. He grabbed a nearby railing with his mechanical left arm as the _Radiant Essence_ turned to the right.

"Pushing reactor to five-fourths output," repeated Zork 'Ferukolee from the operations panel.

Being as far back as they were in the formation, 'Gorlomee watched as the entire fleet split in half as they turned around. One side veered off to the left as the other went right. The Covenant fleet came into view as 'Gorlomee's vessel turned and accelerated. The Ship Master saw that the Covenant had already turned around and fired.

"Prepare for second volley!" said the image of Admiral Hood. "Evade the torpedoes as best you can, but we need to get a second volley off quick."

"Torpedo impact in five fractions, Master," 'Ferukolee said.

"Charge all plasma turrets, and rotate to fire," 'Gorlomee ordered.

"Plasma turrets charging, collection at fifty percent," said the Sangheili at the weapons panel, Uhra 'Veriknee.

"Impact in three fractions, Master," came another warning from 'Ferukolee.

"Vessel is in firing position. Shall I switch to emergency thrusters?" 'Blarghomee asked.

"No, keep our course steady," the Ship Master answered. The Covenant fleet was now centered on the right hand viewscreen.

"Sending firing solutions now," Hood said. "Same deal as before."

"Target package received," Doru 'Forguemee said as he opened the transmission at his communications panel.

"One fraction, Master. Collision imminent," 'Ferukolee warned one last time.

"Keep our course steady!" 'Gorlomee almost yelled in response.

Suddenly warning klaxons blared on the bridge as the plasma torpedo smashed into the energy shield surrounding the Holy Crusader destroyer. For a split second, all the viewscreens on the bridge flashed bright silver from the shield.

"Energy shield is at thirty-four percent, beginning recharging

process," 'Ferukolee quickly punched a few holobuttons.

"Plasma turrets are fully charged, setting system to automatic firing," 'Veriknee shouted over the sirens. "Torpedoes will fire in less than two fractions."

The bridge fell silent save for the klaxons while the crew waited for the torpedoes to fire.

"Torpedoes away, Master," announced 'Veriknee.

Niko "Gorlomee watched the right hand viewscreen as three balls of red fire issued forth from the destroyer's turrets. The Humans had already launched their missiles when the Crusader's fired their plasma torpedoes. And once again, the space above Gantrithos was filled with plumes of exhaust, plasma, and slugs of molten metal. The Covenant fleet in front of them began to scatter.

"Rotate to face," 'Gorlomee said to 'Blarghomee.

"Rotating vessel to face opponent," responded the navigator.

As the Radiant Essence swiveled around, Niko saw silver flashes envelope the Covenant vessels as they took hits from the allied weapons. The enemy ships were rapidly increasing in size.

"Break off, attack in groups," Admiral Hood quickly ordered. "Do not engage the enemy alone!"

UNSC Cruiser Talon, Near Planet Gantrithos

"All ships target the nearest flagship and fire on my mark," Commodore Schmidt said to the camera by his chair.

"MAC guns are hot and Infernos are armed, sir," Lieutenant Rhodes announced.

"Covenant flagship at eighty thousand kilometers, sir," Lieutenant Braxton said as he wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Fire!" Frank shouted.

The all too familiar thumps of Inferno missiles firing sounded through the ship. Thousands of Infernos and Archers sped towards the massive Covenant flagship. The seven kilometer behemoth slowly rotated to fire, but suddenly a bright purple beam of light shot from a large rotating turret mounted on the top of the ship. The beam caught one of the frigates in the Commodore's flotilla, which subsequently exploded as the beam passed through the main reactor. Meanwhile, the remaining ships fired their MAC rounds at the flagship.

"Shit, Lord Hood warned us about those things," Frank muttered to himself. "All ships spread out! Let's not give that thing a bigger target than we have to. And prepare to fire at that thing again, it definitely won't go down easily."

"Already on it, sir. Same configuration?" Rhodes asked.

"Correct, Lieutenant," Schmidt replied

"Infernos are armed, and MACs are at fifty percent," Rhodes said.

"Franklin, you have control of the emergency thrusters," the Commodore turned to the holographic figure beside him. "If that thing so much as twitches our direction, I want you to be ready to jump this ship out of its line of fire."

"Will do, sir," Franklin said as he adjusted his holographic glasses.

On the main viewscreen, the Covenant flagship flared bright silver as the UNSC missiles exploded on its energy shield. Even though over a thousand missiles struck the flagship, it wasn't enough to cover the whole seven kilometer length of the monstrous warship. The shield around the flagship shone for several seconds as it absorbed the explosions, but when the MAC rounds hit it finally faded away.

"MACs are hot!" Rhodes shouted.

"All shipsâ€" Frank began to give an order but was cut off when a loud bang resonated through the hull of the Talon and everyone was violently thrown to the left. Schmidt quickly regained his composure and continued, "Fire at will!"

Once again, the sound of launching Infernos echoed through the ship. Two hundred missiles sped towards the flagship and were joined by over a thousand other missiles from the rest of the flotilla.

"Sorry for the lack of notice, sir," Franklin apologized.

"It's ok, Franklin," Schmidt forgave the AI. "All that matters is that we're still alive."

"Sir, the flagship is charging its plasma turrets," Lieutenant Braxton swiveled in his chair to face the Commodore. His face was an advertisement for fear. Commodore Schmidt saw why when he looked at the main viewscreen. Seven glowing turrets dotted the side of the Covenant flagship.

Once the Talon's Magnetic Accelerator Cannons fired, the Commodore ordered, "Break formation! Do your best to evade those torpedoes. Lieutenant Zheng, change our course to one-one-seven degrees."

"Aye, sir. Course changed to one-one-seven degrees," Zheng said as the ship spun clockwise ninety degrees.

"Everyone might want to securely strap themselves in," Franklin announced.

Several clicks were heard as the bridge crew secured their safety belts. Suddenly another loud bang was heard as the emergency thrusters ignited and the ship was blasted downwards. Out of the corner of his eye on the starboard viewscreen, Frank saw a bright purple beam from the Covenant flagship pass directly over them.

"Good work, Franklin," Schmidt commended.

"Sir, we're getting a transmission from the destroyer Appalachia," Lieutenant Ramirez said.

"Torpedoes inbound, sir! Impact in thirty seconds" Braxton struggled to keep his anxiety under control.

"Put it through on my personal screen, Ramirez," said the Commodore.

"Aye, sir," Ramirez replied. She quickly typed a few commands and a young face appeared on the Commodore's personal viewscreen.

"What is it, Commander?" Frank asked.

"I have fired a Shiva warhead into the flagship, sir," the Commander explained. "I would advise a cease fire on the ship so its shield can regenerate and trap the explosion inside."

"Good work, son. You need to broadcast a cease fire and retreat to the rest of the flotilla, I'm occupied with several plasma torpedoes," Schmidt said. He switched the screen off and turned to his crew, "Lieutenant Zheng, new course bearing two-one-zero degrees. Braxton, I want one hundred thirty percent from the reactors."

"New course is two-one-zero degrees, sir," Zheng replied.

"Reactor is set for one-three-zero percent," came the response from Braxton. "Reactor red line in eight minutes, sir."

The Talon violently shook. If the crew hadn't been strapped into their chairs, they would've been sprawled out on the floor.

"Torpedo impact on decks fourteen through sixteen, starboard side, mid section!" Braxton shouted.

Frank rubbed the back of his neck. The force of the torpedo impact left him with whiplash. "Evacuate and vent atmosphere in compartments"

The ship was hit a second and third time in rapid succession. Warning klaxons blared as the hull was breached.

"Impact on decks four through nine, starboard side, aft section!" Lieutenant Braxton furiously typed away to get evacuation warnings to areas affected. "Hull breaches on decks six, seven, and fifteen!"

Loud thumps spontaneously echoed through the ship as compromised compartments explosively decompressed.

"Contain the plasma as quickly as you can, Braxton." Schmidt ordered.

"Hull breach on upper decks is contained," Braxton continued typing. "Breach on lower decks is still spreading."

"Approaching safe distance, sir," Franklin said.

"Thank you, Franklin. While Lieutenant Braxton is busy, I need you to slow us down," Schmidt ordered.

"Aye, sir," Franklin replied.

The Talon rotated a full one hundred eighty degrees and its engines roared. The Covenant flagship was now on the main viewscreen again.

"Hull breach has been contained, sir," Lieutenant Braxton announced.

"Have any major compartments been lost?" the Commodore asked.

"We've lost hangar A-4 and armory A-4," the young Lieutenant answered. "Other than that, nothing else major was lost, sir."

Frank would have replied, but he was glued to the main viewscreen. While Lieutenant Braxton was talking, a large fireball appeared in the middle of the flagship. An electromagnetic pulse emanated from the blast and was reflected back inwards. The flagship's shield was back online. The fireball kept growing. The Covenant's shield was working against them now. The hundred megaton nuclear explosion was contained inside the shield. After several seconds, the shield finally gave up and the explosion radiated outwards. Under such tremendous stress, the hull of the massive Covenant flagship shattered. Huge pieces of shrapnel, many the size of UNSC ships, flew in every direction. Some smashed into other Covenant vessels and even knocked them out of the battle.

A loud victory cheer sounded on the bridge of the Talon. However, the battle was far from over.

"Franklin, how many ships did my flotilla lose to that thing?" the Commodore inquired.

"Five, sir," Franklin replied. "However, this battle seems to be going our way so far."

They got lucky against that flagship. They should have lost more considering all the firepower that monster had. But still, five ships was a lot to lose against a single vessel.

"So be it," Frank said, still massaging his neck. "Let's get back in there. All ships change course to three-one-five degrees, delta formation. We ain't done yet, folks."

18. Ch 17: The Guardians of Gantrithos

Chapter 17: The Guardians of Gantrithos

Landing Zone November, Grid Victor-15, Gantrithos

11th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation
(Covenant Holy Calendar)_

2205 hours, October 30, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)_

The explosive bolts holding the hatch on Staff Sergeant Shank's drop

pod blew, and the hatch flew several meters forward. Jim grabbed his BR55 Battle Rifle from the inside wall of his pod and stepped out into the fresh air. He scanned his surroundings expecting hostile fire from every direction, but saw nothing but gigantic trees and heard only the ambient noises of what he assumed to be the native wildlife. He landed in the middle of a forest. The trees all around him stood several hundred meters into the air, and it would have taken his entire platoon to surround the trunk of one. Bright beams of sunlight shone down through the foliage above giving the area a slightly angelic feel. This made Jim even more cautious as continued to scan the area. Since the trees were so large, there was a lot of open space in between and the platoon was less likely to get separated, but there could be numerous enemies lurking behind the trees. He found the rest of his platoon's pods nearby, and once he decided the area was in fact clear, Jim jogged over to the approximate center of the pod cluster.

"Gather round, Marines!" Jim shouted. All the ODSTs carefully scouting the vicinity cautiously turned and congregated around the Staff Sergeant. "Alright, men, we need to send scouting parties around and secure a perimeter. If you see anything hostile, kill it. I don't care if it's a Brute or a giant ladybug, if it attacks you, you are to neutralize it immediately. If we run into any problems we need to try to establish contact with the rest of Sierra Company. They should all be nearby. Our job is to hold grid Victor-one-five until the dropships arrive."

The Sergeant then went around and hand selected five groups of three ODSTs to go scout. He told the remaining Helljumpers to help him guard the ordnance they packed in their pods in case the Covenant attacked.

Several minutes passed before Jim heard anything from his scouts. He wandered around the LZ for a while, and took the time to think. This is too easy, he said to himself. The Covenant should be here already. They should have seen our pods dropping. It's like they're letting themselves be invaded. He paused for a second after that thought. Maybe they're luring us into a trap!

His thought was interrupted by a crackle on his helmet's radio, "Sir, there's a group of Jackals heading towards the camp."

"Details?" Shank asked. "Where are they coming from? How far are they? And how many are there?"

"I'm at the edge of the forest, about three klicks east by northeast of the LZ," came the reply. "The Jackals are about half a klick from my position in the same direction. It looks like there are about twenty of them, sir. No armor support."

"Good work, Private," Jim said on the platoon frequency. "All scouting parties report back to the LZ. We've got trouble on the way."

"Sergeant!" a Private called from across the landing zone.

Jim hurried over to the soldier and asked, "What is it Private?"

"There's something here. I heard something rustle," the young ODST

explained.

Sergeant Shank carefully listened for a while, and sure enough he heard a slight rustle as if someone was shuffling their feet. He tried to determine where it was coming from, but he couldn't quite pinpoint the location.

"Keep your finger on your trigger and stay on your guard," Jim told the Private. "We don't want anything taking us by surprise."

The Staff Sergeant turned from the soldier and went back to supervising. No more than a minute after he left the Private did he hear a loud thump behind him. He didn't even have to hear the two bursts of gunfire that followed to know that they were under attack. He wheeled about on his heels and raised his BR55 to the approximate height of a Brute's head, but what he saw in front of him almost made him drop his rifle.

The beast stood about five meters tall. Its upper body had a girth of about two meters, but it tapered down to half that size at the waist. Its legs were like those of an Elite, two joints at the knee and large hooves. However, three such legs sprouted from the waist giving the monster a unique tripod stance. It had large humanoid arms that were more than twice the size of a full grown man. Its back was curved slightly forward its shoulders were hunched over. The creature's head, which resembled that of a Tyrannosaur, hung on a long, thick neck and drooped below its shoulders. Although its head was vaguely reptilian, it had no scales of any sort on its body. The creature's hide looked as if it was made of stone.

In one swift motion, the gigantic beast reached down and snatched up the awestruck ODS the Sergeant had just finished talking to with a large three-fingered hand. The young soldier let out a blood-curdling scream as his bones were pulverized in the beast's hand and was promptly tossed into its gaping mouth like an afternoon snack.

"Contact!" Jim shouted at the top of his lungs as he fired a few bursts from his Battle Rifle. "We have a huge contact!"

The leviathan let out a deafening roar that sounded like an erupting volcano once it had finished its meal. The rattle of gunfire was heard all over the LZ as the ODSs turned and fired on this new threat. Armor piercing rounds ricocheted off the creature's hide as it strode towards a group of five soldiers nearby. They slowly backed up as the creature approached.

Staff Sergeant Shank dropped his rifle and ran to the nearest drop pod. He skidded to a halt, grabbed the Jackhammer rocket launcher that was inside, and dropping to one knee on the ground next to the pod, he hoisted the weapon onto his shoulder.

"Use the Jackhammers!" he yelled. "Our AP rounds aren't doing shit to that thing!"

Jim drew a bead on the abomination and fired. The hellish beast swiped a massive paw at the group of soldiers before the rocket exploded on its left shoulder. The ODSs tried to scatter, but the beast managed to strike three of them and sent them flying across the landing zone. The creature roared again when the rocket hit, but the

only damage it sustained was a bit of charring where the rocket impacted.

"Take it down!" Jim shouted.

ODSTs all around him were scrambling to get rocket launchers of their own. The black armored Marines knelt next to pods for cover and fired their rockets. A barrage of explosions pummeled the behemoth and it staggered backwards. The creature quickly regained its composure and waved away the smoke as it charged towards the soldiers. Other than large charred blotches on the beast's rocky hide, not a scratch could be found. The beast took a swing at the nearest ODST who was still frantically firing his BR55 at it and trying to backpedal. The Marine quickly rolled backwards and avoided the stone fist, which instead slammed into a drop pod and sent it crashing into one of the gargantuan trees.

"Scatter!" Jim hollered as the creature continued forward at an alarming pace. The Sergeant ran and took cover by a tree and once again drew a bead on the beast.

The behemoth grabbed an unlucky ODST not quite agile enough to escape. This one screamed just like the first as his bones were crushed in the monster's grip. With its other hand, the creature sent three more soldiers flailing through the air. It then took the Helljumper in its hand and tossed him straight into the air like it was throwing away an empty wrapper. Before continuing on its rampage, the beast roared once more.

Staff Sergeant Shank had an idea. He aimed at the stone monster's gaping maw and fired. The rocket hit dead center, and when it exploded the beast reeled backwards and pawed at its mouth and throat.

"Aim for the mouth!" Jim ordered.

Several more rockets streaked towards the creature and exploded engulfing its head in fire. The roar gradually became more of a howl, and then ceased to exist. Before the smoke had even cleared, the stone leviathan fell to the ground with a horrendous thump. The ODSTs slowly and carefully approached the huge body.

Jim spotted Private Roberts and beckoned him over. "I want a head count fast," he said. Without a sound, Roberts saluted and ran off to find everyone left in the platoon.

"What was that, Sarge?" one of the nearby Helljumpers asked.

"Hell if I know, Corporal," Jim shrugged. "That's not one of the known species in the Covenant, and it would be quite strange to be adding new species now. It must be indigenous to this planet."

"Sarge, look. It's skin is literally made of rock," the Corporal said as he brushed his hand along the creature's massive leg.

"It's not just any rock. Jackhammers didn't even leave a scratch on it," another ODST exclaimed.

"I know. I just hope we don't run into any more of these," Jim said. "But I have a bad feeling we will."

"Boss," Private Roberts called as he came jogging up to the Sergeant.
"We've got eight dead, sir."

"Wounded?" Jim asked.

"None," Roberts replied. "Everyone that thing hit was killed. My guess is blunt force trauma."

"So that leaves us with what? Thirty-two?" Jim asked rhetorically. "I hope the dropships get here soon."

Before he could gather his thoughts, Jim saw a pulse of green light at across the landing zone. Then several more as plasma bolts streaked towards them.

"Jackals!" one of the soldiers shouted.

Two columns of twelve Jackals stepped into view from behind one of the massive trees and spread into a wedge formation with their shields in front. Gunfire echoed off the trees and the ODSs scattered to find cover behind trees and drop pods. Plasma splashed on soldiers' cover causing metal to melt and wood to char. The energy shields carried by the Jackals absorbed each bullet that hit them. The Jackals were so closely packed that none of the soldiers could get clear shots. That was until several rockets flew towards the Jackals who tried to duck behind the cover of their personal energy shields. The action was futile because when the rockets exploded, the shields overloaded and dissipated. In a matter of seconds, all twenty-four Jackals were incapacitated.

Landing Zone Alpha, Grid Tango-07, Gantrithos

_11th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation
(Covenant Holy Calendar)_

2230 hours, October 30, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

"Sir, we've just gotten several reports from the ODSs of attacks by some strange new species," announced a Marine Lieutenant Colonel as he ran up to Master Chief Petty Officer John-117.

"How many attacks?" the Chief asked.

"Uh, five, sir," the Lieutenant Colonel searched the transcript in his hand. "They're scattered in several of the Uniform, Victor, and Whiskey grids. That's where the forest is. A few of them really wreaked havoc among the ODSs almost completely wiping out a few platoons, sir. All threats have been neutralized though."

"Any description of the creatures, Carlson?" the Chief needed more intel. They needed to go through that forest to get to the primary objective.

"All the reports have said they were big stone monsters," the Lieutenant Colonel Carlson shrugged.

"They are called the Jorgothar," a white armored Elite explained as

he strode towards the pair of Humans. "The beasts are not part of the Covenant, but they do act as sort of unofficial guardians of Gantrithos."

The Elite walked up to John and put his right hand on the Spartan's left shoulder. John just stood and stared at the Elite through his visor, unsure of what this gesture meant. He felt uneasy. He didn't like being this close to an Elite.

"Greetings," the Elite said when he finally took his hand off the Chief's shoulder. "Are you the one they call the Master Chief?"

"I am," John replied.

"I am Field Master Kado 'Toromee," said the Elite. "I am in charge of all Holy Crusader Covert Operations in this invasion. If I can assist you in any way, I will."

"Tell me more about these Jorgothar," the Chief insisted. He opened a comm. channel with the other Spartans so they could hear what the Elite was saying.

"These creatures are nearly three times larger than the average Sangheili," "Toromee described. "They originated from the tallest mountain range on this planet, and their hide is made from the stone of those mountains. They roam freely outside that mountain range now, but they rarely ever roam the plains or other open spaces. They tend to stay in forests, mountains, and other areas with places to hide. When Jorgothar attack, it is always an ambush. However, they seldom attack in groups. They usually attack alone. They are incredibly difficult to defeat. They have few weaknesses. One is the face. Aim for the eyes or mouth, for those are the softest targets. The other weakness is the crotch between each of its three legs. If the flesh there is hit with an explosive force, the legs will be rendered useless."

"Thank you," the Chief nodded to 'Toromee. Six blue acknowledgement lights winked on John's HUD. His team heard.

"Glad to be of assistance," the Field Master bowed.

John opened a private link to his team, "Spartans, meet at my position, ASAP." After his team's acknowledgement lights blinked he quickly switched his helmet's speakers on, "Where's Sergeant Johnson?"

A black hand suddenly shot up in the middle of a crowd of Marines. The Sergeant Major weaved his way through and stepped into the open.

"Right here, Chief!" Johnson called. "What do you need?"

"Select some runners for me Johnson," the Master Chief said. "I'm gonna issue out some orders for the invasion, and I want them to get to the entire invasion force."

"Right away, Chief," Johnson obliged. He went over and selected several Marines from his battalion who then followed the Sergeant back to John. While the Sergeant was getting runners, the other Spartans met up with the Chief. After everyone was together John

noticed the white Elite walking back to his own army.

"Come join us, 'Toromee. You need to here this too," the Chief told him. Surprised, Kado turned and walked back to the group.

"We need to be careful when we pass through the forest," John started. "We don't want any of thoseâ€| umâ€"

"Jorgothar," 'Toromee said.

"Thank you," John continued. "We don't want any of those Jorgothar to sneak up on us. I'll split up my team. Four of us will take point while the other three will bring up the rear. 'Toromee, I need you to select a team of eight Covert Elites, including yourself in the group, to join my team at point. The rest of your Covert Ops guys will be our scouts and cover the flanks of the army. Aside from the Covert Elites and vehicles, we'll be going through the forest in a single column, twenty-five soldiers across. We don't want to get separated while we're in there. The trees are spread out enough that our cavalry and heavy artillery can fit through easily, but they are coming through last. Once we get out in the open, the cavalry and artillery will lead. There will be an order to the column; it will alternate one battalion of Holy Crusader forces then one battalion of UNSC forces. The troops that were already assigned to guard the LZ know what they need to do. Now that we've got our defenses up, the ODSs should be coming back to join us soon. They'll be coming too. Commanders need to gather their troops together and prepare to mobilize. We move out in fifteen minutes."

The Marine runners saluted the Chief and dashed off to tell any commander they could find even the Holy Crusaders. 'Toromee gave John a nod and went to gather his Covert Ops forces.

"Stock up Spartans, pack high explosives with your normal gear," John told his team. "We need the extra punch for those rock monsters."

The Spartans gave their squad leader a crisp salute and ran off to the temporary armory in the center of the camp. John stood and stared at the forest they were about to enter. He took this moment to himself to think his plan through and work through every possible scenario in his head. This invasion had the possibility of succeeding with flying colors or complete failure. John couldn't let the latter happen.

The allied army quickly marched through the gigantic forest. John, Fred, Alan, and Linda led the invasion with watchful eyes. Their half ton Mjolnir armor not even making a sound on the forest floor. On either side and behind the Spartans camouflaged Elites silently jogged along. Fifty meters behind them was the first line of the army. Twenty-five Hunters marched shoulder to shoulder, a very daunting sight even to the Spartans. Elites, Grunts, more Hunters, and Humans followed. Camouflaged Elites and Grunts from Kado 'Toromee's Army of Swift Revenge darted from tree to tree along the entire length of the main column on either side.

"See anything yet, Blue Leader?" The Master Chief heard Will's voice over his helmet's radio.

"Not yet, Red Leader," John replied. They had been in the forest for over half an hour and they hadn't come across any enemies yet, both Jorgothar and Covenant.

After several more minutes John held an armored hand up and signaled a halt.

"I heard something," he said. "Black team, go on ahead and tell me if you see anything."

'Toromee and his invisible Elites slowly advanced. They checked behind several large trees in front of them but saw nothing.

"There's nothing here," 'Toromee reported.

"Alright, keep moving," the Chief ordered.

Blue team had gone no more than twenty meters when John saw one of the huge stone beasts drop right in front of his team. It quickly took a swipe at the Spartans with a massive palm. The Jorgothar's movements were surprisingly quick. The Spartans' enhanced reflexes enabled them to barely roll away, however Fred was a millisecond too slow. The stone hand caught his side and tossed him into a nearby tree trunk. The other Spartans quickly rolled to their feet and grabbed the Jackhammer rocket launchers strapped to their backs. The camouflaged Elites sprayed the monster with plasma fire hoping to distract it long enough for the Spartans to aim for the weak spots. The plasma slowly melted away the rocky hide, but was otherwise useless against the Jorgothar.

Linda fired a rocket at the beast and struck the crotch between two of its legs. From the other side, Alan fired and hit his target. One of the beast's legs collapsed and it let out a roar that contained more anger than pain. John took aim at the Jorgothar's maw and fired twice. The creature's massive head was engulfed in flames and smoke and its roar turned into a wail. The behemoth's head appeared from smoke and fell limply to the ground.

"Blue Two!" John called as he looked for Fred. John saw his teammate lying face down on the ground next to a tree and ran over to him. "Blue Two! Acknowledge!"

Fred's blue acknowledgement light winked on John's HUD, but he remained motionless. Relief came and went several times as John approached his teammate. He rolled Fred over on his back and saw boiling hydrostatic gel ooze out of the vents on Fred's armor. However, when John touched his comrade to roll him over, his hand met a slick barrier a centimeter off the armor. Fred's shield was still working.

"I'm alright, Chief," Fred coughed. "Nothing's broken, but that impact seriously knocked the wind out of me."

"Check your armor's systems, see if anything's damaged," John said.

"Running diagnostic now," Fred wheezed as he got up on one knee. He waited a few seconds and then stood up. "Pressure regulator has been

damaged, Chief. But other than that, everything's fine."

"Your suit can't withstand another blow like that, you'd better hang behind us until we get out of this place," John told him.

"Aye aye, sir," Fred replied.

"Blue team, form up," the Master Chief ordered as both he and Fred jogged back to the fallen Jorgothar. They met up with Linda and Alan and then continued forward.

For about twenty more minutes they continued without meeting any resistance. It seemed as if it would be straight shooting from there on out. But John knew it would be too good to be true.

"Contact! We have contact!" John heard someone scream over the radio. Then silence.

Will and the rest of Red team slowly marched behind several rows of Scorpion tanks. Constantly checking behind them, Red team was making sure nothing snuck up from behind the army. They were prepared for anything. Anything except an attack from above.

Suddenly, Will saw what had to be one of the Jorgothar drop down several hundred meters in front of him. He motioned for his team to follow and they ran towards the enemy.

"Contact! We have contact!" a terrified Marine screamed.

When they were close enough, Red team saw that the monstrosity had landed on top of a Scorpion tank. The sixty-six ton tank was completely destroyed. The main cannon was mangled and the cockpit was crushed. Both men inside were undoubtedly killed. One of the caterpillar treads was torn off and tossed to the side, and the engine was smoking. A few meters in front of the tank Red team saw the three-legged rock with a Warthog Light Reconnaissance Vehicle in its hands. Several Marines in other Warthogs nearby fired the jeeps' mounted chainguns, but it was all to no avail. The 12.7 mm armor piercing rounds bounced harmlessly off the beast's rocky hide. In an instant, the Jorgothar took the jeep in its hands and crushed it. It happened so fast that the Marines inside couldn't get out in time.

"Let's draw it away from the army!" Will ordered as he fired his Battle Rifle in an attempt to distract the creature. Nicholas and Joanna mimicked him and backpedaled away from the army. It worked. The Jorgothar dropped the compacted Warthog, turned away from the main host, and focused on the three Spartans who were now running in circles around it.

"Red team, what's going on back there?" Will heard John's voice over the radio.

Several Scorpion tanks with clear shots took advantage of the situation. However, they didn't know about the weak spots on the Jorgothar, so all of their shots were aimed at the creature's torso.

"We got one of those big rock guys back here!" Will quickly explained. "Can't talk now, I'll get back to you." He switched to his helmet's broadcasting speakers. "Fire at the flesh in between its legs!" he shouted.

The Spartans were still running in circles trying to confuse the stone beast. Despite the Jorgothar's incredible speed, it had troubles keeping up with the Spartans running around it at forty-five kilometers per hour. It tried to swing at them but missed every time.

The Scorpions fired again. This time the Jorgothar's legs gave way and it fell over on its side. Will primed a frag grenade, tossed it into the monster's mouth, and quickly dove away. The beast's head exploded in a ball of fire and smoke. Bits of rock were tossed everywhere. The energy shield around Will's Mjolnir armor flashed a bright gold as debris ricocheted off him.

"Keep moving everyone!" Will ordered. The Marines in the Warthogs and Scorpions obliged and rumbled off to rejoin the rest of the army. Red team dropped back to cover the rear once again.

"Keep your eyes on the canopy, Blue Leader," Will said over a private comm. channel. "They're dropping from the trees."

"Yeah, we ran into one about twenty minutes ago, but I couldn't tell where it came from," John replied. "Thanks for the warning, Red Leader. What's the damage situation back there?"

"We lost one Scorpion and one Warthog, Chief," Will reported. "Five Marines are dead."

"It's a good thing we haven't run into more of those things," John said. "Otherwise we wouldn't be in as good a shape as we are now."

"Tell me about it. How much longer until we're out of this place?" Will asked.

"I don't know. This forest is a lot bigger than I thought," John said. "But I'm hoping we'll be out of here in about a half hour. Keep your eyes peeled until then."

"Aye aye, Chief," Will said. He switched over to Red team's channel. "Good work, team. Let's form up. And watch the canopy. Holler if you see anything out of the ordinary up there."

Two acknowledgement lights winked on Will's HUD, and Red Team cautiously moved out following behind the allied host's heavy artillery.

19. Ch 18: Apocalypse Please, part 2

I'm sorry for the lack of chapters in the last couple months and the extremely long wait for this chapter, but I've been very busy with school, the national gymnastics meet, studying for finals, etc. Now that school is out and I don't have to worry about finals I will be adding chapters to this story more often. So please read and review. I hope to get my next chapter up in the next 2 weeks.

****Chapter 18: Apocalypse Please, part 2****

City of Divinity, Gantrithos

_12th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation
(Covenant Holy Calendar)_

0040 hours, October 31, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

"They must be holing themselves up within the city walls, Blue Leader," Linda said over the radio. The Spartans and Kado 'Toromee's squad of Elites were hunkered down behind a small hill several kilometers outside the Prophets' capital city. The allied army was holding position just barely within eyeshot of the Master Chief's team. Linda lay on the top of the hill with her S2 AM Sniper Rifle scoping the situation.

The City of Divinity was unlike anything the Humans had ever seen. Behind the thirty meter high walls were huge curvaceous buildings that resembled the shapes of their warships and were made of the same purple metal. Several of the bulbous structures rose over a kilometer into the air, but most were only about as tall as the trees they saw in the forest. Some were even standing at odd angles as opposed to vertical. Through her rifle's scope, Linda could see that the city's footprint was completely circular and that it had to be at least fifty kilometers across. In the center of the city was a large spherical building that Linda thought must be the capitol building. It was quite a sight, for the city lay in the middle of the plains alone. No major geological features could be seen in any direction. Several roads ran from the city in every direction from wide arches in the surrounding wall, which were the only weaknesses in the wall that Linda could spot.

"I don't see any activity," Linda continued. "The walls are too high to see over, and the only way into the city that I can see is through the main arches which are closed off by doors."

John contemplated the situation for a few moments before he spoke up, "And we have no air support so there's no way we can tell what's going on inside the city until we actually get in there. There will no doubt be artillery fire coming from over the wall when they see our army."

This was a tough situation. The Spartans were indeed offensive warriors and had done many infiltration missions, but this was completely different. In other missions like this they were able use sewers and other underground passages as an alternate route in, but they didn't have that option now. They would have to enter the city through the main gates.

John looked up at the sky for a moment while he thought. It looked different. He remembered that when they finally exited the huge forest he looked up and saw explosions and warships from both sides in the distance. Now the explosions had stopped and UNSC and Holy Crusader ships could be seen in low orbit over the planet. That meant that the Humans had just won the largest ship-to-ship battle in the history of the war.

The Chief suddenly got an idea.

"Fleet Admiral Hood, this is Master Chief Spartan one-one-seven," John called over the private COM link.

"This is Admiral Hood," came the reply. "Everything alright down there Chief?"

"Well, we're kinda stuck between a rock and a hard place right now, sir," the Master Chief explained. "The army is holding several kilometers outside the city right now and we have no options except a full-frontal attack. We sure could use some air support right about now if you could spare it, sir."

"Roger that, Chief," Hood acknowledged. "Since the fighting has stopped up here for the time being, we'll send some Longswords down for you. I'll see if the Arbiter can spare anything too. Just hang on tight for the time being. Hood out."

The Chief switched over to his team's frequency. "Looks like we will be getting air support after all. The fighting upstairs has stopped for now, so Lord Hood is gonna send some Longswords for aerial bombardments and hopefully the Arbiter can send us some Banshees and Seraphs. We just need to hang back here until they arrive. In the meantime, we need to keep monitoring the city to watch for any activity."

Six acknowledgement lights winked on John's HUD and 'Toromee and his Elites nodded. John then walked up the small hill, lay down next to Linda, and surveyed the field and city in front of them.

After several minutes, John heard a faint rumble in the distance behind him. He turned his head and saw what looked like a swarm of birds in the direction of the army. It quickly got closer and he could barely make out the shapes of Longswords and Seraphs in the cloud of fighters. As the fighters passed John's position, he finally realized the actual size of the force Admiral Hood and the Arbiter sent down. Over a thousand Longswords and Seraphs roared past only a few hundred meters above the ground and continued on towards the city.

John watched as the fighters neared the city. He waited for them to encounter hostile anti-air fire, but it never came. It was as if the city had been abandoned. The fighters dropped their payloads and arced up into a half loop and righted themselves as they sped away from the city.

"Blue Three, status?" John asked. A split second later he realized that he didn't need to ask the question. A dome of translucent, bright silver suddenly surrounded the city.

"Negative impact, Blue Leader," Linda reported. "There's an energy shield surrounding the entire city. All the ordnance is just exploding on the shield. Nothing's getting through."

"Damn, I was afraid of that," the Master Chief cursed. "But that explains the oddly defensive strategy and the lack of anti-air fire. We've gotta bring down that shield before we can even enter the city."

The Longswords and Seraphs turned around and headed for the city

again. They dropped what was left of their payloads, flew straight up through the clouds above, and returned to the allied fleet orbiting above.

"It looks like the shield surrounds the wall too," Linda said.

John took a moment and thought, a rare occurrence for him especially in battle. After a few silent seconds an idea came to him and he switched to a private COM link with Sergeant Johnson.

"Johnson, mobilize the army," John ordered.

"Aye aye, Chief," came Johnson's reply.

"As you approach, do not fire at the city," the Chief explained. "There is an energy shield surrounding the city. However, if the Covenant fires at us return fire because that means the shield is down. If they do not fire at us, continue until you reach the city wall. My team and I will meet up with you as you pass our position."

"You got it, Chief," Johnson answered.

The army rolled towards the city. Master Chief and his team were at the front leading the attack. The Chief's eyes never left the city in front of him making sure the Covenant didn't try an artillery strike to take them by surprise. Behind the Chief was about a million soldiers eager to shed some Covenant blood. A line of Scorpion battle tanks nearly half a kilometer long was at the head of the army followed by a line of Wraith mortar tanks. Several rows of Warthogs and Ghosts trailed behind the armor and finally the infantry at the rear. In addition, the Arbiter had sent a few hundred Banshees for air support during the battle and they moved along with the army above the infantry.

When they were about a kilometer from the wall, the Chief saw hundreds of blue dots rising above the city walls.

"Eyes on the sky!" the Chief shouted over the army-wide COM channel. "Return fire, and scatter!"

John heard the Wraith tanks behind him discharge their plasma mortars and he saw them race towards the city. The enemy mortars slowly closed the gap between the city and the army and John realized that these were not ordinary Wraith mortars. These were nearly twice the size and had to be from stationary artillery guns. The large balls of blue flame were notoriously slow and allowed for the allied army to predict where they would land and quickly disperse from the area. As the army spread out, the plasma impacted the ground and sent boiling glass into the air.

John hoped the best for the army and continued to watch as their bombardment neared the city. He anticipated that they would need to keep the shield down to fire again, thus allowing their mortars through. He was right. The plasma from the Holy Crusaders smashed into the buildings close to the wall and some disappeared behind the wall. Molten metal from the towers rained down onto the streets below.

"Bombardment was successful, Chief," John heard Cortana's voice in his head. "But I would recommend moving at best speed towards the city."

The Master Chief didn't even need to ask why, because the Covenant fired again, but this was one long continuous volley.

"Charge the city!" John shouted.

With a little less than a kilometer to go, the army picked up its pace. The armor moved at full throttle towards the city and the infantry sprinted behind. The globs of superheated plasma splashed on the ground behind the army as they ran. The Holy Crusaders kept returning fire at the city aiming approximately where the hostile artillery was firing from. When they got within fifty meters of the wall the artillery stopped.

John and his team reached the wall first. The Chief turned back to face the army and saw the last of the plasma mortars strike the ground behind the infantry.

"Cortana, any casualties yet?" the Chief asked. Cortana had access to the biosigns of the entire army and monitored them constantly.

"Not yet, Chief," Cortana responded, "But I'm reading several minor injuries, most likely from burns. They should all be good to continue fighting though."

"Good," John said. "Now we need to find a way to break through one of the main gates. Our Scorpions have AP and HE rounds, correct?"

"They do indeed, Chief," Cortana answered.

"Good, we could use some of the Wraiths to start melting away the gate and use the Scorpions' Armor Piercing rounds to pierce the molten metal thus speeding up the melting and hopefully catching anyone dumb enough to stand behind the gate," the Chief explained. "Unless you have a better idea."

"You've been around me too long, Chief. You're starting to think like me," Cortana quipped. "The closest gate is about five hundred meters to your left. And remember, as long as we stay within fifty meters of the wall we're safe. The Covenant artillery can't target us this close to the wall; we're closer than their minimum range."

John grunted an acknowledgement and turned to Sergeant Johnson standing next to him. "Sergeant, I want you to take command of the armor and artillery outside the walls once we enter the city," he ordered.

"Sure thing," Johnson replied. "Give 'em hell in there, Chief."

The Master Chief jogged off towards the gate. He gathered several Wraiths and Scorpions to him when he reached the gate and gave them orders to breach it. The troops around the area dispersed so they wouldn't get splattered by flying globules of molten metal and the Wraiths began to fire. Plasma splashed on the gate, which was made of the same strange violet metal the Covenant usually used, and started to melt the metal and turn it red hot. The Chief gave the order for

the Scorpions to start firing, and they obliged. The AP rounds smashed into the hot slag, but only left craters in their wakes. The gate was much thicker than the Chief anticipated. After several minutes, 90mm holes started to appear in the gate.

While the Scorpions and Wraiths coaxed the gate into giving way, thousands of troops stood at the flanks of the gate awaiting the Chief's signal to charge through. As the gate weakened, John ordered the tanks positioned in front of the gate to move around to the side to avoid taking the brunt of the fire that would come out of the gate. There would no doubt be thousands of Covenant troops inside the gate waiting for the allied forces to charge through. The Chief would have to be cautious of how he maneuvered the army.

"Cease fire!" the Chief shouted.

Utter silence followed the command. A meter wide hole at John's eye level was left in the gate. The metal was still red-hot.

"Toss some grenades through the hole," John whispered. "Keep them away from the hole."

John took three frag grenades in his gauntleted hand, primed them all, and tossed them through the hole as he sprinted past. A short roar of surprise escaped a Brute who must have seen the grenades. Several Marines and Grunts followed suit and tossed some more grenades through the hole.

"Clear the area. Let's make this hole bigger," the Master Chief said just before the grenades exploded.

Once the friendly forces had gotten to a safe distance, the tanks continued to widen the hole in the gate. John waited for the hole to reach about three meters across before he gave the order to charge.

A squad of overzealous Elites charged through the gate first firing their plasma rifles in all directions. Purple beams of light flashed down from nearby structures as the Elites tried to find targets. Only a few seconds passed before the squad of Elites lay dead in the street with pools of dark purple blood forming beneath their heads.

"Shit!" the Chief cursed. "Hold up! We've got snipers in the buildings!" John was quick to prevent any further unnecessary deaths, and began thinking of a plan to eliminate the snipers.

Before he could say anything, the Holy Crusader Wraiths began firing over the wall at the buildings. Hopefully they could take out some of the snipers or maybe distract them while the troops entered the city.

"Go go go!" John shouted. "And keep your eyes up!"

The Marines nearby started to pour through the hole six across shooting up at the buildings. After a while, Grunts and Elites mingled themselves in with the Marines. The purple beams continued to streak from the buildings, but the Jackal snipers couldn't keep up with the sheer number of troops pouring into the street.

"Spartans, come to my position ASAP," John said.

As the Master Chief waited for his team, he saw a pair of Hunters lumber through the gate with their massive shields up and fuel rod cannons at the ready. John watched them as the sniper beams reflected off their thick armor. The Hunters turned back to back and stood close enough to cover each other's weak spots on their backs. They glowed green as they charged their cannons and fired at the buildings.

"What do you need, Chief?" John heard Fred's voice. He turned around to see his Spartans lined up at attention.

"Linda and Nicholas, I need you two to help get rid of our Jackal sniper problem," the Chief said. "Get in there, find some cover, and do what you do best."

"Sir!" came the unison reply from the two expert snipers.

"The rest of you, get in there and do what you can," John continued. "We need to defend this gate and make sure a steady flow of troops gets through. This is our only entrance into the city."

With that, John saw six acknowledgement lights wink and the Spartans mingled in with the troops charging through the gate. The Chief followed close behind. When he entered the city he tried to survey the situation while staying behind what cover he could find. On either side of the main road were massive bulbous buildings that rose approximately six hundred meters into the sky. A blockade of rubble had been haphazardly constructed just before the first intersection a little over a hundred meters from the gate.

The city was very precisely laid out. Roads ran in concentric circles from the wall, with each circle being exactly one hundred seventeen meters, or one unit according to the Covenant, smaller than the last. Only eight straight roads ran from the surrounding wall to the center, which divided the city up into equally sized sections like a pie. At the center of the city was the High Council Chamber, a large sphere, four Covenant units in diameter, where the High Councils of Law, Religion, Society, and Military met. The heads of each Council were now considered to be the new Hierarchs to replace Truth, Mercy, and Regret. These Councils were the primary targets. The Spartans and Kado 'Toromee's team had to make their way twenty-five kilometers down the street, get into the Council Chamber and eliminate the four High Councils all without being detected. It was going to be tricky.

Behind the barricade by the first intersection a group of Jackals jumped up on top and set their energy shield in front of them so they overlapped. However, this didn't create much of a protective barrier because seconds later several rockets smashed into the loose barricade sending the Jackals flying through the air. The loose debris that made up the blockade scattered and the allied forces started to pour through. The troops split up at the intersection and went in every direction. Some went to find and disable artillery emplacements while the rest tried to hold parts of the city they had already taken.

"Light vehicles can start entering the city now," the Chief said over the radio. "And Johnson, I want those tanks bombarding the

city."

The troops on the main road just inside the gate moved over to the side and made way for the light vehicles that now made their way through the gate. Several Warthogs, Ghosts, and Specters drove through the gate while infantry continued to pour in. The Banshees, which had stayed behind a ways to avoid the hostile artillery fire, flew overhead looking for dogfights.

Now the battle was going full force. Around many corners the UNSC and Holy Crusaders would meet up with a makeshift bunker of debris with Jackals and Brutes hiding in ambush. Sometimes the allies would turn a corner and find Covenant Ghosts and Specters waiting for them. Occasionally groups of Jackals would appear out of doorways and alleys to try and take the allied army by surprise. And always, the combined forces had to look to the sky, for snipers hid high up in every building and Drones picked off their soldiers as they fluttered through the air. But every group of Covenant they ran into was quickly eliminated with minimal casualties. The invasion of the city was moving along rapidly.

_Chamber of War, High Council Chamber, City of Divinity,
Gantrithos_

_12th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation
(Covenant Holy Calendar)_

0230 hours, October 31, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

"Our forces are being overwhelmed, and the enemy is moving incredibly fast through the streets of the city," explained the Lesser Prophet of Honor. "The enemy forces are disabling our artillery and bombarding the city with their own. And supposedly there is a group of Demons trying to make their way secretly to the Council Chamber. The combined forces of the Humans and the Heretics are overpowering us."

"Well what do you suggest we do, Honor?" asked the Prophet of Pity, head of the Council of Military. Pity and six other Prophets made up the Council. This was where military decisions were discussed before issuing them out to the armed forces of the Covenant.

"I say we release the Guardians on them," Honor proposed. "This is the sole reason we captured and trained several of them."

"Are we really in that desperate of a situation?" inquired Pity. "The Guardians should only be used as a last option. What about sending out the Honor Guard?"

"They have already been deployed, but enemy forces are too many. If we don't do something drastic soon, we will be overrun by the time the suns conceal themselves," said the Lesser Prophet.

"So be it," the head of the Council gravely replied. "Set loose the Guardians, send out the _entire_ army, and make sure you cleanse the city of the infidels."

"Thank you, noble Pity," Honor stood up from his seat and

bowed.

"But what are you going to do about the Demons?" Pity caught the Lesser Prophet before he left.

"We will have a surprise waiting for them if they ever reach the High Council Chamber," Honor answered with a crooked grin.

Kado 'Toromee and his team of Covert Ops Sangheili met back up with the Master Chief and his Spartans inside the city. The team tended to stay in intersections, hunker down for a few minutes, and take out the Jackals who were sniping from the buildings. The invasion had been going as planned. In about six units the allied forces had controlled everything within a fifty unit radius. The Holy Crusader Wraiths were constantly bombarding the city with their plasma mortars. They would aim at the buildings and cause debris and molten metal to drop onto the enemy.

"'Toromee, any suggestions on how to get to the big building in the middle?" the Master Chief asked.

"Well, trying to maneuver through alleyways without being seen will prove to be nearly impossible," Kado answered. "We need to find some sort of passageway that will take us to the High Council Chamber."

"Are there underground passages like sewers or drains inside the city?" the Chief asked again.

"There might be. Look for anything that might indicate a passageway under the street," the Field Master replied.

Suddenly Kado heard what sounded like an earthquake, like the rubbing of stone upon stone.

"By the Gods!" 'Toromee exclaimed. "They've unleashed the Jorgothar upon us!"

20. Ch 19: An In and Out Job

****Chapter 19: An In and Out Job****

City of Divinity, Gantrithos

_12th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation
(Covenant Holy Calendar)_

0345 hours, October 31, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

Dust, fire, blood, and plasma created a cloud at the street level obscuring the vision of everyone fighting on the ground. Luckily, the Master Chief and his team didn't have to worry about that problem. As they did in most infiltration missions, the Spartans had found an underground passageway to move about easily without being noticed. In this case it was a high-speed transportation tunnel, a Covenant subway of sorts. The only things the team had to worry about were the

trains that raced through the narrow tunnels at even intervals.

The Spartans and Covert Ops Elites ran down the cylindrical tunnel to reach the city center as quickly as possible. They had been down there for about an hour making their way to the city and they were already within a kilometer of the High Council Chamber. The tunnel was eerily silent save for the occasional passing train. The battle above ground could no longer be heard. It had been about forty minutes since they last heard an explosion.

"Incoming, Chief," Cortana interrupted the silence.

"Hit the deck!" John shouted as he dropped to the ground.

Seconds later, a train whizzed overhead at several hundred kilometers per hour. The trains cylindrical, like the tunnel, and floated through the exact center of the tunnel with about half a meter between it and the walls of the tunnel. For any normal Human, it would've been more than enough room, but for the Spartans and Elite it was a tight squeeze.

"Alright, let's keep moving," the Chief said. The team got up and continued their quick pace down the tunnel. They were surprised they had made it so far so quickly, because about every five minutes they had to dodge a train, and there were also stations, which they had to creep through undetected. The deep navy blue lighting in the tunnel didn't help either.

"The next station should be just outside the High Council Chamber," Cortana explained. "You'll have to go outside for a bit between the station and the Chamber, and expect heavy resistance."

"Roger that," John acknowledged.

Several more minutes of running, and they finally came upon the station. The Master Chief signaled for the Elites to move forward and clear the area. The Spartans had to stay back until Kado 'Toromee gave the "all clear" signal. The Elites had camouflage and could clear the area quickly without being seen. The Spartans could clear the area quickly, but the enemy would see them and alert more of the enemies.

John saw blurs run past him and up onto the station platform. He waited patiently while the Covert Ops Elites did their thing. He heard dull thumps as hostiles were silently eliminated. These Elites were undoubtedly the best of the Holy Crusaders. Moments later, the Chief heard the "all clear" signal: a short, six-note singsong tune. It was the same one the Spartans had used since their training days, and only a select few outside the Spartans knew it. John decided to teach it to 'Toromee while they were traversing the tunnels. The way he figured was if the two teams were going to work together, they would have to learn each other's codes.

John motioned with his hand for the Spartans to move out, and they entered the station. The lighting changed to a brilliant white, which made the purple walls shine brightly. Several bodies of dead Jackals littered the floor, but the Elites were nowhere to be found. The Chief found a stairwell and made his way to it. As he approached, he saw 'Toromee materialize in front of him.

"This leads up to the street," the white-armored Elite said. "We will go first and eliminate any hostiles between here and the High Council Chamber. Once it is clear, we'll give you the signal."

"Roger that," the Chief nodded his acknowledgement. He held up a closed fist and his team stopped behind him. 'Toromee disappeared again and jogged up the stairs. The other Elites in his team were standing so still that the Chief hadn't even noticed them until they moved to follow their Field Master.

'Toromee slowly peaked out of the hole in the ground which the stairwell was in. There wasn't much activity in the streets, but it was enough to make his team be extra cautious. He saw a column of Ghosts whiz by from a large doorway in the High Council Chamber. Faint explosions could be heard in the distance. The battle was getting closer to the Chamber.

Across the street, two Jiralhanae Honor Guards stood at one of the entrances to the Chamber. Kado took one last look around to make sure nobody else was near. He took four of his Sangheili and slowly and quietly made his way across the street trying to stay out of the Guards' peripheral vision. The Field Master crept up next to the first guard, and in a swift motion grabbed his head and twisted hard. A loud snap was heard as the Jiralhanae's neck fractured. 'Toromee quickly retreated several paces backwards as the beast fell in a heap on the ground. The other Guard heard what had happened and walked over to his fallen comrade. 'Toromee then saw the head of the other Jiralhanae violently twist around and he too fell to the ground.

Kado whistled the short six tone "all clear" signal when he was certain they were alone. Moments later he saw the Spartans emerge from the stairwell and jog across the street with the rest of the Sangheili following behind.

"The door is locked," 'Toromee explained as the Spartans approached. "Can your construct open it?"

"Give me a sec," the lead Spartan replied. 'Toromee found it nearly impossible to tell the Spartans apart from each other. He wondered how they knew who was who. At least with his warriors he could see their faces.

The lead Spartan, whom 'Toromee assumed was the Master Chief, went up to the data terminal next to the semi-circular door and pressed his hand to the terminal. A golden shimmer surrounded his hand and the door opened.

"Cortana is in the building's mainframe," the Master Chief explained. "She can access the building schematics and security cameras to make sure we find the stealthiest way to our objective."

"Excellent," the Field Master replied. "That will make our job much easier."

"Be careful, there are a lot of guards inside this door. It must be the main lobby," a female voice echoed inside his helmet. _That must be Cortana_, 'Toromee thought. "It will be impossible to get past

them without being seen. You have to engage them."

"At least we have the element of surprise," 'Toromee said. He didn't want to engage the enemy unless he absolutely had to, but it didn't look like he had much of a choice here. He turned to his squad of Sangheili, "Do not reveal yourselves unless your generator overheats."

Kado holstered his plasma rifle and readied his energy sword but did not ignite it. He nodded to the Master Chief to signal he was ready, and the Spartan returned the nod. Together, the Field Master and the Master Chief charged through the door and into the main lobby. The Master Chief opened fire with his crude projectile weapon at the first Jiralhanae guard they encountered. His team of Spartans followed him and filled the lobby with a hail of bullets. Kado quickly looked around. The huge room was filled with Jiralhanae Honor Guard. Many of the surprised beasts dropped their ceremonial pikes and grabbed their plasma rifles in an attempt to counter the attack.

'Toromee's Sangheili rushed in behind the Spartans firing their plasma rifles. One by one they became visible as they were hit by hostile fire and their camouflage generators overheated. Still unseen, 'Toromee finally found what he was looking for: a single Jiralhanae clad in Honor Guard armor like the rest, but with a small red flag over his left shoulder. This one commanded the Guards in the lobby. As 'Toromee charged the Honor Guard Captain, the other Jiralhanae didn't even notice his invisible self as he ran by them. Even the Captain was oblivious until Kado ignited his energy sword only two strides from his opponent. In a swift motion, the Field Master swung his sword out in front of him and beheaded the Jiralhanae, who fell limply to the ground. 'Toromee quickly extinguished his energy sword and rolled away to dodge the stray plasma bolts from the nearby Guards who had seen their Captain mysteriously die.

The Spartans and other Sangheili moved to find cover and continued to spray the room with bullets and plasma while the surprised Jiralhanae dropped like flies. It was only a matter of minutes before the last of the Guards lay dead on the lobby floor. Even the Jiralhanae Honor Guard was no match for the best warriors of the UNSC and Holy Crusaders.

"Directly across the lobby from the entrance is a maintenance lift," Cortana said to the team. "It should take you directly up to the floor with the main Chambers."

The team quietly made their way to the lift. Cortana opened the door and the team stepped in. It was a thin cylindrical shaft and the whole team couldn't fit at once, but since it was a gravity lift so they didn't have to worry about taking multiple trips with a conventional elevator.

The team reached the top of the shaft and found themselves in a narrow maintenance hallway. Following Cortana's directions, they wandered their way through the passageway until they reached a larger hallway.

"There's a large room thirty meters to the left of your position," Cortana informed. "The hallway is empty, you're all clear."

"Roger that Cortana," John replied.

The Chief opened the hatch to the hallway and took a step out and to the right. He scanned the hallway keeping an eye out for anyone who might round a corner and spot them. The team filed out and moved down the hallway. When everyone was in the hallway, the Chief went back to the head of the group by the door to the large room Cortana spoke of.

"Scanners show no movement, and security cameras show no visual contacts," Cortana said.

The Chief thought this over for a second. _This is odd, there should be guards swarming this place. Are the councils not even here? Maybe the guards are hiding in the chambers waiting for us in ambush._

"Alright, Cortana, open her up," John sighed. "Be on your toes everyone."

The semicircular door split down the middle and hissed as it rotated open. The Chief held up his hand and signaled for the team to wait, and he took a look around the room. When he was satisfied the coast was clear, he slowly entered the room followed by the rest of the team. The circular room was about twenty meters across, and eight of the semicircular doors were spaced evenly around the circumference. The team would have to split up into four groups to get the four councils before they could escape.

Just then, the Chief saw something that made him freeze in his spot. Something shimmered in the corner of his eye, and by the size of it he knew it wasn't one of the camouflaged Elites on his team. John held up his hand and made a signal to retreat out the door, but suddenly several blue flashes appeared around the room.

"Ambush!" John shouted. He fired several bursts from his BR55 Battle Rifle at the nearest blur, which was now moving towards him at an alarming rate. Deep violet blood sprayed from the figure as the bullets pierced it. After several shots, the blur materialized into a Brute. It was holding a staff with energy blades on both ends. If wielded properly, a weapon like that could be more deadly than the energy swords the Elites used. The Brute took a swipe at John's head with his staff, but John quickly rolled out of the way.

All hell broke loose as the rattle of gunfire and the pulsing of plasma fire filled the room. As more Brutes appeared, John took a better look at them. These were no ordinary Brutes. Bright silver armor covered the arms, chest, and legs of these Brutes. They moved with skill unlike any Brute the Chief had ever seen. Eight Brutes in total appeared out of thin air. Two to one odds would be a no-brainer against a typical pack of Brutes. However, the odds don't mean anything when facing an unknown enemy.

The Spartans and Elites dodged and rolled from the Brutes' attacks. An energy blade nicked John's shoulder and depleted his energy shield. Bullets and plasma flew everywhere. Loud pings could be heard as bullets ricocheted off the Brutes' silver armor. John stood up and

faced a charging Brute. He raised his rifle and fired a couple bursts into the Brute's open mouth. Deep violet blood exploded out the back of its head as the Brute fell limply onto John, momentarily pinning him to the ground. As he struggled to push the Brute off of him, John heard a scream and he pulled up his team's biomonitors on his HUD. Alan's biosigns flat lined.

With a boost of adrenaline, the Chief pushed the dead Brute off of him and knelt only to find another Brute standing in front of him. John fired several rounds into the Brute's exposed knees and the bulky alien collapsed. John stood up as the Brute fell, and he smashed the butt of his rifle across the side of the alien's skull effectively crushing it. Another scream sounded above the din and Joanna's biosigns flat lined.

John quickly looked around and saw that four Brutes still remained. John looked around for cover, and dove behind what looked like an oddly shaped chair. He targeted a Brute across the room, and frantically fired at the Brute's bare stomach. Unfortunately, the Brute wasn't phased by his shots and continued to impale an Elite with his energy staff. The Elite dropped to the floor and the Brute now turned to John. John stood up from behind his cover and took aim at the Brute's mouth as it roared in anger. He fired a few shots and the Brute dropped next to the Elite it just skewered.

The remaining Brutes were quickly handled by the rest of the team. The white armored 'Toromee beheaded one with his energy sword while the other two were taken down by the combined fire of the remaining Spartans. John surveyed the room and found several dead Elites along with the Brutes on the ground. He spotted Alan and Joanna laying on the floor with gaping wounds in their chests. He pulled up his team roster on his HUD and marked Alan-017 and Joanna-130 as MIA. He then rolled each of them over, opened the access panel to their fusion power sources, and entered the fail-safe codes. John didn't want to risk the Covenant getting their hands on the only piece of superior technology the Humans had, so in approximately two minutes, the fusion power sources on Alan's and Jo's armor would overload and burn everything within a ten meter radius.

"Alright, let's get in there, do our job, and get out ASAP," John ordered. "Split up and pick a door."

The team split themselves up into four teams. As one, they opened the doors, tossed a few grenades into the chambers and filled the rooms with fire. When the smoke cleared, seven Prophets lay dead in each chamber save for one. John walked up to the Prophet with his rifle raised.

"Demon!" the Prophet cursed. "You may think you have won, but you have not. You will never stop the Great Journey. Even now, our forces are at your planet once again preparing to take the Ark. This time, you will not stop us. While you and your zealous allies brought your fleets here. We took advantage of your absence. Your planet is ours!"

A shot rang out in the chamber and the Prophet fell to the ground, but John hadn't pressed his trigger. The Chief turned around and saw Fred at the door.

"We have to get back to Earth, now!"

21. Ch 20: Meanwhile

_Sorry for the incredibly long wait everyone, but I've run out of ideas with this story and I've kinda lost interest. My current plan is to link this story up with whatever the Halo 3 plot will be, and I can't really write any more until I find out more about the Halo 3 plot. So The War of Rage is being put on hold until the release of Halo 3 next year. In the meantime, check out the other story I'm working on. It's called Shadows of an Empire. It's a post-war fanfic in which the UNSC tries to keep itself from crumbling apart. It's going to be filled with crazy plot twists as it progresses. I've gotten a few good reviews for it so far. That should keep all you guys occupied until I start working on this story again.

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Anyways, here's a short snippet of the next chapter I was working on. I had intended on making this much, much longer, but I lost interest after I wrote this part and I couldn't get any good ideas. So yeah, go read my other story once you've read this. And once again, I'm sorry to keep all you guys hanging, but I don't really have a choice.

****Chapter 20: Meanwhileâ€|****

City of Divinity, Gantrithos

_12th Cycle, 5th Division, 3rd Stage, 9th Age of Reclamation
(Covenant Holy Calendar)_

0405 hours, October 31, 2552 (UNSC Military Calendar)

Staff Sergeant Shank shook uncontrollably as he hid in a crevice in the side of a building. One of those three-legged stone Guardians prowled the streets alongside his hiding place. Half of his platoon was killed before they had met up with the Guardian, and the other half, weary from several hours of intense battle, was completely wiped out by the leviathan. Jim had barely escaped from it, but not unscathed. During the battle the Guardian swept Jim's legs out from under him, breaking them both in the process. Private Roberts had come up to him and offered to carry him to safety, but the Staff Sergeant denied the help assuring Roberts that he'd be fine. Jim continued to fire at the creature from his prone position, but when the last of his troops had been killed he lay still hoping the Jorgothar would think he was dead. Jim saw his chance when the Guardian turned its back, and he dragged himself as fast as he could to his new hiding place.

The Guardian let out a deafening roar and surveyed the street for survivors. Jim had been waiting in the crevice for nearly five minutes as the Guardian prowled outside and shock had just started to set in. In his semiconscious state he heard several explosions near his position. The Guardian roared again and thundered down the street towards its attacker. Several more explosions followed during the next few minutes as the Staff Sergeant slipped further out of consciousness. He stayed awake just long enough to hear the rumble of Scorpion tanks and faint footsteps nearby, and he let himself fall

out of his hiding place.

"Lieutenant, we've got wounded over here!" Jim heard as he saw a blurry figure run towards him and kneel next to him. "Hang on, sir. We'll get you out of here."

"Wh-what's g-going on?" Jim managed to stutter.

"Our job is done, sir," the Marine said. "We're leaving this place."

Jim felt himself being lifted and managed a faint "Oo-rah" before the last remnants of his consciousness left him.

End
file.